Chapter One

The Regime Facing Its Own Future: Fascist "Totalitarianism"

The four-year period spanning from mid-1936 to mid-1940—that is, from the end of the Italo-Ethiopian War to Italy's entry into World War II—can be viewed from multiple perspectives, with emphasis placed on various distinctive aspects of the era. Rather than focusing on these aspects—however significant they may be or appear to be—we prefer, for the moment, to dwell on what, in our view, was the overall significance of those four years, on their place, so to speak, within the general context of the historical evolution of Italian fascism, and on the relationship between this phase of the fascist regime and Mussolini's personality and political actions.

The historian who today looks back on those years is inclined to discern in them a whole series of symptoms—major and minor—of crisis, of the crisis that would come to a head in the following three years, during the war. Identifying these "symptoms," understanding their causes, and grasping their present and future implications is not only important but necessary for the historian. However, they should not be overestimated or mechanically projected onto the subsequent three-year period. However significant they may have been, in and of themselves they explain very little of what happened after June 10, 1940; and even with regard to the four-year period we will address in this volume, it is necessary to view them without succumbing to the temptation to find in them precise foreshadowings of what came later, since in many cases this would ultimately lead one astray. On the contrary, these "symptoms" should be viewed above all as manifestations of the crisis of those years—that is, a crisis which, in most cases, had different characteristics from that of the subsequent three-year period or, in any case, a different intensity, dynamic, and outcome.

While it is indeed correct to speak of a crisis of the Fascist regime in the years 1936–40, it is, however, a stretch—and, in essence, a mistake—to ascribe a definite and definitive significance to this crisis, drawing the conclusion that it was bound to unfold exactly as it did in the subsequent years—that is, to lead to the fall of Fascism. Without in any way diminishing the gravity and significance of the crisis of 1936–40, it is far more accurate—and, for the sake of a genuine historical understanding of the period, more productive—to recognize that this crisis was not heading toward the fall of the fascist regime, but rather toward its transformation from within into something different, something very difficult to define and that depended largely on the timing, the manner, and the political and institutional context in which Mussolini's exit from the political scene would take place. The crisis that developed after June 10, 1940, and culminated on July 25 was linked to—and depended very little on—that of the preceding four-year period. It was not essentially determined by internal causes or events. These undoubtedly existed, but only as consequences of an external factor, more important than all the others combined: Italy's participation in World War II and the unfavorable course of the war itself—not only (and, ultimately, not so much) for Italy but for Germany. Without the war and the defeat, the Fascist regime would not have fallen. It would have transformed, but it would not have fallen from within. If one understands the reasons for this, one also understands why, in the years immediately following the conquest of Ethiopia—even though many spoke of a crisis of the regime—almost no one realistically considered the possibility of its collapse, and the majority of contemporaries had no, or only a vague, accurate perception of the significance and implications of the crisis afflicting the regime. Despite this crisis, the regime in fact appeared quite solid, still capable of developing in various conceivable directions, practically unassailable from within, and certainly not by the anti-fascist movement.

Organized anti-fascism—whether democratic or communist—did not constitute a threat, despite a certain resurgence linked to the Spanish Civil War; it could still cause the regime some routine

difficulties, but it certainly could not truly worry it, much less present itself as a concrete alternative to it. In many broad sectors of society, as we shall see, there was undoubtedly a significant undercurrent of discontent, caused, first, by the economic situation—and in particular by the rising real cost of living—and, second, by concerns raised by fascism's policies, especially its foreign policy. This discontent and these concerns, however, did not find—and, with very rare exceptions, did not seek—any forms of organization or channels of expression: in the vast majority of cases, they remained at a pre-political stage; even among the working class—the group least won over by Fascism, especially among the older workers—Communist calls for participation in clandestine militias and resistance met with very little response. Ultimately, if active anti-fascism—and the Communists in particular—achieved any positive results, it was mainly among certain youth, student, and intellectual circles. However significant these setbacks may have been, they certainly did not threaten the stability of the regime. The same must be said of the various components of the ruling class that supported the regime, led by the business community: even among them, there was no shortage of discontent and concern; their actual political clout, however, was by no means sufficient to allow them to exert a positive influence: in many cases, the political clout of the "supporters" was barely enough to enable them to defend—against the regime's encroachments and erosion—the positions they held and the balances upon which the compromise reached with fascism during the "March on Rome" and reaffirmed after the Matteotti crisis had been founded. Beyond this, even if they had wanted to, the "supporters" were not politically in a position to do more—and often struggled to do even that. Not to mention that very few among them would have viewed a change of regime favorably. In fact, what Aquarone wrote with precision and realism about the country as a whole also applies to the ruling class of supporters: \

While there were numerous signs of discontent visible within various sectors of Italian public opinion, it is also true that the vast majority of the population—even when not enthusiastically supporting Fascism—certainly did not appear willing to regard the regime as a mortal enemy to be overthrown at any cost, much less to take serious risks in order to achieve that goal. Even those within the various social classes who were strongly hostile to individual aspects of Fascist policy were not necessarily equally opposed to Mussolini's dictatorship as a solution to the problem of government and power in Italy.

Thus, if we wish to adopt a historical rather than a mythological perspective, and if we are to highlight and explore the crisis of those years, we must also be very clear that, despite that crisis, the period from mid-1936 to mid-1940 was, for Fascism, a sort of autumn—and, despite everything, in its own way, at least in appearance, a fruitful one—during which few could foresee the grip of the winter chill, and most of them either lacked the means or deemed it wiser not to attempt to halt the march toward it or redirect it toward a mild winter—unlikely, yet not entirely out of the question. And this was true even within the core Fascist leadership itself, where, although personal jealousies and ambitions had not subsided, there were no longer any genuine manifestations of dissent, and no one thought to pose as an anti-Mussolini figure or to replace him; so much so that even Farinacci was now "in line"2 and Balbo had ended up accepting his gilded exile in Libya and had renounced his plans from a few years earlier (how fanciful and how serious, how self-serving and how closely linked to the "Duce's" first deterioration in health that occurred during that period is difficult to say) to sideline Mussolini and take power either directly or through a proxy3. And even the most thoughtful and far-sighted among them—though by then aware that the regime was facing a turning point and that this would lead either to its further regression or to its transformation into a more "democratic" and truly corporatist form of fascism—which, moreover, Mussolini would have found very difficult to manage—did not, however, give the slightest thought to replacing the "Duce" at the helm of the regime, but rather to his glorification during his lifetime—which, by placing him, alone and above all others, in a sort of Olympus where he would be bestowed every possible honor and adulation, would effectively remove

him from the exercise of power and allow others to assume, in his name, the actual political leadership of the regime. For over a decade, the watchword for Mussolini and fascism had been “to endure”—that is, to address concretely (and not only during particularly difficult moments such as the aftermath of the Matteotti assassination) the problem of preserving power and, if possible, expanding it. Now, following the conquest of Ethiopia, this problem presented itself in different and largely new terms. Despite all its old and new limitations, its shortcomings, dysfunctions, and contradictions, and its weaknesses, the regime no longer faced internally the risks that had previously plagued Mussolini and the Fascist leadership and that, in part, had shaped their political actions. As will be seen later, the risks that were now looming were of a different nature, linked to the international situation and Mussolini’s approach to it, as well as to the emerging issue of the “post-Mussolini” era. Thus, the prospect of the future—the problem of “enduring”—took on a new meaning: depending on the various visions of fascism and the underlying political objectives that characterized the different factions and factions within the Fascist leadership, the aim was essentially to influence Mussolini’s foreign policy orientations and to secure in advance—through this and other means—the positions deemed most suitable for guiding the “post-Mussolini” era and, if possible, to manage it personally.

3 In 1931–32, Balbo harbored the intention of taking Mussolini’s place, either directly or through a proxy. Initially, the idea must have been prompted by the “Duce’s” poor health and the possibility of his death. In the summer of 1931, rumors to this effect—and regarding the existence of “principled” disagreements between Balbo and Mussolini—circulated with some persistence both in Italy and within the circles of the Anti-Fascist Concentration in Paris (see the Arpinati Papers, intelligence reports from Paris, Milan, and Rome dated July 31, August 28, and August 29, 1931, respectively). Even when Mussolini’s health was no longer a cause for concern, Balbo continued, at least until the early months of 1932, to think and speak of replacing Mussolini with one of the Quadrumviri.

The conquest of Ethiopia contributed significantly to this new situation. Thanks to it, the regime—and Mussolini in particular—achieved a prestigious victory in the country that translated into exceptionally broad public support, the likes of which it had not enjoyed until then. This support extended not only to those who, in the words of G. Devoto[4], “in their subconscious, expected to join the mainstream of public consensus with good reason and to make the nation’s structure truly totalitarian from within,” but also—as G. Amendola[5]—also made inroads among southern peasants, the unemployed, and certain sectors of the working class, to an extent that, while remaining a minority, was “in any case substantially more significant than what the liberal state had managed to achieve in that direction after unification”[6]. Not to mention those young people (and not only Fascists[7]) for whom the conquest of Ethiopia appeared to be the prelude to a new “era” of Fascism—a time of reflection following success, of exalting the empire, and of realizing—at last—the “social moment” of the Fascist revolution. As we have already noted,8 this consensus—though more enthusiastic, boisterous, and exalted (yet sincere)—was nevertheless less solid than the support fascism had enjoyed during the period of the “Great Crisis” and would soon be undermined by the reservations and concerns aroused by the fascist intervention in Spain and, more generally, by the new directions of Mussolini’s foreign policy and—especially among the middle class—his domestic policy as well. Nevertheless, it contributed significantly to strengthening the regime, both at the mass level and by increasingly spreading among a not insignificant portion of its opponents—whether dormant or active—the “wait-and-see” faction, and the “internal dissidents” the conviction that Fascism had now definitively triumphed and could not be overthrown, and,

7 A typical example in this regard is the testimony of G. Vinay, *Pretesti della memoria per un maestro*, Milan-Naples 1967, pp. 76 ff. “If in ’36 I could take pleasure in the war in Africa and not be

an antifascist—even though I could not be a fascist—it was due to a tangle of irrationalities, almost all of them childish... For me, [the war] had to exist for those humble people, to add a little flavor to their bread as predestined emigrants... In any case, I thought, this war proves that fascism makes sense. And in saying this, I wasn't reasoning, but relying on the storehouse of my distant impressions, the storehouse of the rationalized traumas that back then shaped young fascists or anti-fascists."

Therefore, it was no longer worth the risk or sacrifice to resist him.[9] Nor should it be underestimated that it was precisely as a result of Mussolini's success in Africa that, even among the supporting ruling class, the residual ambitions to influence the "Duce's" political decisions in any way—or at least to shape them to some extent—practically vanished entirely. And this was true even though it took only a few months for most of the illusions and hopes aroused by the victory in Ethiopia—and by Mussolini's assertion that Italy now considered itself a "satisfied" nation—to vanish among them, leading a not insignificant portion to adopt an increasingly cautious and critical attitude toward the regime.

That said, it must be made clear from the outset that, however significant the influence of the success in Ethiopia may have been, the new situation that arose during this period for the Fascist regime was above all the consequence of a process that had been underway for some time—a process that the Ethiopian campaign undoubtedly helped to advance more rapidly and easily to a more advanced stage, but which was inherent in the logic of the regime itself and in the way it had been developing over the past ten years. We are referring to the process of the regime's gradual totalitarianization. A process that the Fascist regime never fully completed, but which nonetheless certainly characterized its final years—namely, those following the conquest of Ethiopia—with consequences for the regime that were highly significant, both positive and negative, so much so that it is necessary to dwell on it for a moment and examine its significance closely.

In recent decades—especially following the 1951 publication of the first edition of H. Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—historians and political scientists around the world have extensively theorized, studied, and discussed the specific characteristics and broader significance of modern "totalitarianism," with particular reference to the Nazi experience,

9 G. Gentile wrote, "After the Founding of the Empire," in *Civiltà fascista*, June 1936, pp. 321 ff.: "Today, before him [Mussolini], all the dregs of the internal opposition fall away and disperse; all doubts and uncertainties—arising from minor observations, petty resentments, or ingrained prejudices that are difficult to overcome precisely for that reason—dissipate like fog in the wind. And if there were still some bitter, melancholic spirit secretly ruminating on the old longing for the bygone days of a formal and nonexistent democratic freedom, he would certainly now have no qualms about lying to himself; he would hesitate to deny the light of day and suppress within himself the spontaneous impulse of every Italian heart that opens its blessing arms toward those who have redeemed the homeland from humiliating subjugation to the major European powers, toward those who have forced even the most arrogant foreigners to admit that today's Italy—disciplined, united, and warlike, is no longer the Italy of old, which was viewed with contemptuous condescension, if not with mocking irony. Italy, as everyone can see today, is a strong, leading nation that must be reckoned with. Today, for the first time since Italy came into being and has existed politically and legally, there are neither factions nor parties to paralyze or weaken its will; there is a soul—a conscience, a self-assured personality—resolved to carve out a place for itself in a world where all interests clash, to live a life worthy of its glorious past."

Stalinist and Fascist.[10] It is not our intention here to discuss the validity of these contributions with respect to the broader discourse on the Fascist phenomenon, their fundamental limitations, certain

ambiguities, and some of their undeniable contributions to a better understanding of the Fascist phenomenon. To define our position regarding the theory of “totalitarianism,” it suffices to say that we are essentially in agreement with what G. L. Mosse stated about it in his “Interview on Nazism.” For the purposes of our discussion, however, it is appropriate to refer to it. On the one hand, to recall that even its most discerning and historically informed supporters have had to conclude—either, like Arendt ’2, that at least until 1938 the Fascist regime was not a true totalitarian regime, but rather merely “a common nationalistic dictatorship, born of the difficulties of a multiparty democracy,” or, as D. Fisichella n, that it was always a “failed totalitarianism,” to be classified, in the final analysis, rather among what Fisichella himself defines as “authoritarian mobilization regimes,”[4]. On the other hand, to clarify that our use of the term “totalitarian” in reference to the fascist regime does not imply adherence to the theory of “totalitarianism,” but rather derives from the way fascism itself used and applied the adjective “totalitarian” when referring to its own conception of the state and, therefore, to the structure of the regime that stemmed from it,[5] Thus, the two discourses must not be confused under any circumstances, even if, at times, they have (or seem to have) points in common. In particular, the point (which we have already had occasion to mention in the first volume of this work[16]) concerning the preeminence of politics over the economy in the Fascist regime, just as in the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. With all the theoretical and practical consequences—and, therefore, the concrete historical assessment of the Fascist reality—that stem from this premise.

Among those who have addressed this issue—which is essential for understanding what we have defined as the new situation in which the Fascist regime found itself after the war in Ethiopia—F. Neumann has perhaps delved deepest into it. The conclusion to which he arrives is, in fact, theoretically sound and historically confirmed: it is practically impossible to overthrow a modern totalitarian regime from within—one founded on the primacy of politics over the economy and possessing the material, psychological, and cultural instruments of power characteristic of our era—unless the “revolution” against it originates from within its own ruling class and is capable of utilizing its own political apparatus.[17]

For Neumann, Fascist Italy was a totalitarian regime not substantially different from Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. In reality, for the Fascist regime to be truly totalitarian, it not only lacked the systematic use of mass terror and, therefore, a concentration camp system,[18] but—partly for objective reasons stemming from the compromising manner in which it had come to power, partly due to Mussolini’s underlying pragmatism, and partly in line with his particular conception of totalitarianism—it never aimed to, nor did it fully succeed in implementing, any of the aspects characteristic of a true totalitarian regime. As we will see in greater detail later, it never aimed either at a complete transition from the rule of law to a police state, nor, much less, at establishing the party’s totalitarian control over the state. It did, it is true, work toward a complete concentration of power within the state and a total politicization of society, to the point of seeking to eliminate the distinction between the state and civil society; but even here, it did so from a perspective that had little or nothing to do with that of Nazism or Stalinism. Finally, one must not underestimate the profound difference and the distinct role that the charismatic figure of the leader played in Fascism compared to that in Nazism and Stalinism: decisive in Fascism, it was, in the other two regimes—and especially in the Nazi regime—“far less important.” All this does not, however, prevent us from applying Neumann’s conclusion to the Fascist regime as well, since this regime—even if it certainly did not reach the degree of totalitarianism of the other two—undoubtedly possessed many significant totalitarian characteristics, sufficient to make it comparable in this particular respect to the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. The incompleteness of Fascist totalitarianism and

18 A note dated July 10, 1938, by G. Ciano, *Diario 1937–1943*, Milan 1980, p. 136, indicates that

Mussolini briefly considered “creating a concentration camp, with measures harsher than police confinement.” The idea, likely the result of a fit of rage, was never acted upon, however.

Its peculiarities, in fact, while they might have undermined the regime’s stability, did not do so with regard to the possibility of a grassroots, popular, anti-fascist revolution—against which the regime was more than adequately prepared and for which, moreover, the essential conditions were lacking in the country—but rather with regard to the possibility of a “revolution” originating from within its own ruling class. With regard to this second possibility, it was certainly less prepared than the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. And this constituted a handicap that did not escape the notice of either Mussolini or the true fascists, who were grappling with the question of the regime’s future and, in particular, the “post-Mussolini” era.

During the regime’s first decade, for Mussolini, “enduring” had meant operating essentially on two fronts: expanding and preserving mass support by stifling dissent and organized opposition, and steadily eroding—to his own advantage—ever-wider spheres of power at the expense of the traditional ruling class and the institutions that most fully represented it and, at the same time, safeguarded it against the dynamics of Fascist politics and society. Although it unfolded on both fronts, this policy was implemented more on the former than on the latter—both because of the need to eradicate all forms of active opposition and to win over ever-larger masses to the regime, and because, in doing so, on the one hand it was easier to reassure and appease the traditional ruling class and, on the other hand, because this deprived the class of a further portion of its political clout, since every success of Mussolini’s policy on the first front weakened its ties to the country and, ultimately, its chances of reestablishing—if necessary—relations with organized democratic anti-fascism or, at the very least, with the dormant anti-fascist movement and the anti-fascist camp. Now, after the war in Ethiopia, the situation presented itself in different terms. In nearly fifteen years in power, Mussolini—despite the difficulties and setbacks his policies had faced—had managed to strengthen his position and equip the regime with a whole series of tools that enabled it to view the situation from a different perspective and, in particular, to reverse the order of priority between the two fronts on which it had operated until then. On the first front, routine measures were now sufficient to keep the situation under control, especially if they were supplemented by certain initiatives that would keep alive and revitalize the prospect of a “resurgence” of fascism’s initiative in the social sphere. All the more so because such a “resurgence” Mussolini—despite his increasingly pronounced tendency to prioritize foreign policy over domestic policy and thus to avoid creating new sources of internal difficulty—did not rule out at all in principle or in the medium to long term; it was strongly felt by the new generations of Fascists; and, finally, it fell, at least in certain respects (such as economic policy), within the logic of totalitarian political systems and, therefore, to some extent also of fascism, especially now that Mussolini found himself needing to intensify the totalitarianization of the regime—both to try to make the gap between the country’s economic capabilities and the demands placed on it by its foreign policy less glaring, and to drastically reduce the residual—yet still far too substantial—power of the non-strictly fascist component of the regime.

The gradual intensification of the regime’s totalitarianism in the second half of the 1930s has been explained—by both contemporaries and historians—in terms of the logic of the system, the progressive ossification and bureaucratization of the regime and of fascism, Mussolini’s need to make the regime as monolithic as possible and to exercise maximum control over people and institutions in order to have a free hand to pursue his imperialist policy; and the influence and spirit of emulation of the National Socialist model, driven by the policy of rapprochement—and later alliance—with Germany carried out during those years. There is undoubtedly some truth to all these explanations, even if the facts to which they refer undoubtedly had varying degrees of significance. In particular, Germany’s influence and the

spirit of emulation had a much greater impact on certain sectors of fascism than on the regime as a whole; they encountered strong resistance and, on closer inspection, were only marginally and sporadically present in Mussolini, who, if he looked to the German model at all, did so primarily for other reasons. In addition to these individual factors, one must also bear in mind that—regardless of their respective impact—they interacted with one another, creating an anomalous multiplier effect that amplified the various outcomes relative to the overall process. There is one motivation, however, that historians—perhaps misled by the fact that the issue was practically ignored by the regime's press (though not by the foreign press) and never came to fruition, since the regime collapsed before Mussolini's death—have never dwelled upon, even though it is, in our view, of primary importance: that of the "post-Mussolini" era.

Personally, Mussolini gave the impression—even to his closest associates—that he felt immortal. In reality, as we shall see later, the conclusion of the Ethiopian affair coincided—in part due to the extreme psychological strain it had caused him, compounded at a time that should have been one of relaxation and respite by a new psychological crisis triggered by his youngest daughter's very serious illness—with the onset of a slow but inexorable physical and, in part, psychological decline, which did not escape the notice of the most attentive observers close to him—both Italian and foreign—and of which the "Duce" himself was aware, so much so that he tried to hide it by every means possible and to react to it in various ways, not least by making his relationship with Petacci more intimate and committed, as if seeking in it a second youth and new psychological energy. In this situation, even though it was not discussed openly, the issue of his succession and, more generally, of the "post-Mussolini" era became one of the most pressing political problems both for the Fascist leadership, which—as we have already seen[20] — had for years been well aware of the grave dangers that Mussolini's demise would pose to Fascism—and for the "Duce" himself, who—as we have also seen in the last chapter of the first volume of this work—it was no coincidence that, immediately after the conclusion of the Ethiopian conflict, he considered G. Ciano as his heir apparent and, with this in mind, appointed him to one of the government's key posts. Even setting aside for the moment the discussion of Ciano's "selection," its implications for the Fascist leadership, and its implications for the relationship between father-in-law and son-in-law, the tacit designation of a successor was of little importance for the purposes of the succession issue. When the time came, what would matter far more than the existence of a heir apparent would be the general and specific circumstances—first and foremost, whether or not Mussolini would be able to personally manage the succession—and the balance of power within the regime. What could be considered certain was that, if the balance of power remained the same, the Crown and the traditional elite linked to it (including the army and navy) would not let the opportunity slip by to regain the power they had lost during the years Mussolini had been in power. In the best-case scenario, they would have sought to impose one of their own or, at the very least, a moderate fascist who could manage the transition smoothly and set the regime on the path toward a moderate return to constitutional rule and partial liberalization. Nor could it be entirely ruled out that, if circumstances had been particularly favorable, they might even have played the card of a full-fledged resumption of power. From this perspective, the issue of succession and the "post-Mussolini" era could certainly not be avoided or postponed until it arose for Mussolini and the true fascists. Even setting aside for the moment the specific question of a successor—which was far from easy for a whole series of

In Dino Grandi's diary, under the month of July 1930, there is a copy of an article by A. Cortesi that appeared in the *New York Times* on June 22 of that year and was devoted to the question of Mussolini's succession. Grandi comments on the article with this truly revealing note: "Here is an ill-fated article that may have influenced people and events. Mussolini's successor is currently eight years old. He is among the ranks of our Balilla. But these articles are causing turmoil among Mussolini's

‘Marshals’! Unfortunately, that is the case!”

Setting aside political and personal motives, what mattered—and what would become increasingly urgent to resolve as time went on—was the power structure and the balance of power within which the problem would arise. Hence, for Mussolini—and, albeit with various hypotheses and perspectives, for Fascism—the need to act concretely and swiftly to alter these conditions, so as to arrive at the moment of succession under the best possible circumstances to manage it independently, without concerns about external “interference” that would make a satisfactory solution difficult or even doubtful (which, as we have said, was already predictably not easy within the Fascist leadership itself). Consequently, in practical terms, there arose the need—from this perspective as well—to expand the totalitarian character of the regime, emphasizing its more strictly fascist nature and directly and indirectly extending its actual power at the expense of the traditional faction loyal to the institution, prerogatives, and actual powers of the monarchy.

In the previous volumes and in the first volume of this one, we have had several opportunities to address the issue of the relationship between Mussolini and Victor Emmanuel III.[21] Given the importance this issue assumed during the period under consideration, however, it is appropriate to dwell on it more thoroughly, summarizing its background and examining its developments in detail.

Humanly, psychologically, and culturally, the king and the “Duce”—as we have already noted—were very different and approached political issues—domestic and, above all, international—with vastly different mindsets. Certainly, they never liked each other, and politically they always kept a close and wary watch on one another, so much so that Grandi, in a note from 1944, wrote: “For twenty years, the King and Mussolini watched each other, keeping each other under surveillance, like two fencers on the piste, with their blades locked”22. However, to say—as has also been claimed—that they were not meant to get along and never did25 is an exaggeration and precludes the possibility of fully understanding their personal relationship, particularly the subtle influence that certain shared character traits ultimately had on it. To quote Grandi again: “A deep distrust of everyone and a general contempt for men in general. Two solitary prisoners of their own solitude”[24]. Thus, “one distrusted the other; yet, in their own way, they liked each other,” and, deep down, they held each other in high regard and respected one another, even if their relationship was tinged with a sort of mutual sense of inferiority.

As Artieri26 wrote, Vittorio Emanuele III admired Mussolini’s precision, his clarity even in bureaucratic matters (a quality in which he himself excelled), his selflessness, his simple life, and that “living on little” so dear to his own frugal habits; he appreciated Mussolini’s optimism (because, despite appearances, he too was an optimist); he admired his intuition, his tenacious and precise memory of facts—even the most minute ones; of names—even the most obscure ones; of circumstances—even the most minor ones; his ability to synthesize, and his incisive clarity of expression. And these qualities he admired were, in the king himself, some of his most evident traits as well.

After all, a diarchy is established not only on the antagonism of powers but also on their similarities. The king sincerely admired Mussolini’s organizational, legislative, and transformative genius, as well as his genuine Italian passion, all poured into national development and the work of governing at home...

These very character traits were what made Mussolini personally take a liking to the king and helped determine what Grandi called the “charm” that Victor Emmanuel exerted over the “Duce.” A “charm” that, while it did not influence the political relations between the two, nevertheless played a decisive

role in ensuring that their personal relations remained formally correct at all times; it meant that “all the acts of disrespect—and there were many—that Mussolini directed toward Vittorio Emanuele during twenty years of government were carried out through intermediaries”27 and, above all, that even when, after the second half of 1936, political relations between the two became increasingly strained and Mussolini began to seriously consider the issue of abolishing the monarchy, the entire operation had for him solely and consistently a political significance and never descended into the personal. The numerous outbursts against the monarchy and the sovereign preserved in G. Ciano’s diary should not be misleading. Rather than personal animosity toward Victor Emmanuel, they demonstrate, in our view, on the one hand, the tension that the issue aroused in Mussolini and, on the other hand, his dissatisfaction at not being able to resolve it immediately. That, despite everything, Mussolini always regarded the sovereign with human sympathy and respect seems to us to be clearly evident from a small but significant episode that took place in 1936. As a result of the sanctions and economic difficulties caused by the Ethiopian conflict, a series of measures had been enacted requiring Italian citizens residing in Italy who held capital and securities abroad to declare them so that the state could take possession of them in exchange for their equivalent value in lire or Italian securities. Even the king and members of the royal family complied with the measures. Informed of the matter by the Minister of Finance, Mussolini instructed Thaon di Revel to exempt the sovereign from the measure: “I believe that His Majesty’s securities should be left undisturbed. It is only right that a sovereign should have a nest egg kept safe. The fate of monarchies is often uncertain; it would be undignified if a people were to force their sovereign into exile, where he would have to beg for alms from foreigners.”28 Thus, in conclusion, among the various opinions expressed by Mussolini regarding the king, the most credible seems to us to be that of May 1940 (when the “Duce,” having by then decided to enter the war, had for the time being had to set aside any plans to abolish the monarchy, and the monarchy had endorsed his decision to enter the war), as reported to us by N. D’Aroma[29]:

Vittorio Emanuele is fundamentally a traditionalist. He must obey—and strictly does obey—a sort of secret oral or written testament handed down in the Carignano branch: to make a compromise with the strongest and wear them down, to live off that compromise, without taking on too much responsibility. The man, however, even though he is often petty—with his anti-German grudges and his neighborhood-club-style anticlericalism—nevertheless possesses two important qualities: deep-rooted, steadfast common sense, and a lack of impressionability.

It is thanks to these two qualities that he has gone along with me with thoughtful consideration and almost always with respect!

In more strictly political terms, the relations between Victor Emmanuel III and Mussolini—and, more generally, between the monarchy and fascism from 1925–1926 onward, that is, from the time the regime had begun to take shape[30]—had been characterized by the prevalence of Mussolini’s initiative[31].

31 It is more difficult to determine whether there was—and, if so, in what form—any action taken against the monarchy by intransigent Fascism. In addition to the so-called “Balbo plot” of late 1926 (see *Mussolini il fascista*, II, pp. 219 ff., notes), certain accounts from the time (taken up more or less critically, depending on the case, even by some authors in recent years, such as S. Bertoldi, *Vittorio Emanuele III*, op. cit., pp. 335 ff., and G. Artieri, *Cronaca del Regno d’Italia*, op. cit., II, pp. 400 ff.) attributed to it (and in particular to the Milanese group centered around M. Giampaoli) the assassination attempt on the king on April 12, 1928, during the inauguration of the Milan Trade Fair (see *Mussolini il fascista*, II, p. 461, note). In reality, while it is certain that the Fascist hardliners were largely imbued with republican sentiments and, in any case, hostile to the monarchy—since they saw it as one of the major obstacles to the full realization of the “Fascist revolution”—it is, however,

very difficult to say whether they ever planned or attempted any concrete action. If anything of the sort was planned, it was perhaps only toward the end of 1924, at the height of the Matteotti crisis, when, in anticipation of the Aventinians' return to Montecitorio to join forces with the opposition on the floor, the National Committee of Technical Councils had taken the initiative to convene a congress of the provincial members of those Technical Councils, trade union representatives, and Fascist cultural associations with the aim—should the return to the chamber actually take place—of transforming the congress into a Constituent Assembly and declaring Parliament dissolved. Since the Aventinians did not return to the chamber, the plan was abandoned. It is not, however, implausible to think (even though the only source that mentions the plan, F. Paoloni, *Sistema rappresentativo del fascismo*, Naples 1934, pp. 21 ff., is, of course, silent on this point) that its architects were also considering a possible proclamation of the republic.

The king, while realizing that doing so would weaken his own position and being troubled by it, had practically endured this initiative from the outset, limiting himself to opposing it (and, more often, having it opposed by his most loyal men—or by those who, in any case, looked to him to contain the Fascists' drive for hegemony—present at the highest levels of the PNF and the various state bodies) "in detail," on specific issues that most directly affected the institution of the monarchy and its prerogatives, but without ever engaging in a showdown, which his contempt for men and his distrust of the Italian people led him to believe would be disadvantageous to him. Up until the period under consideration, the most serious "crisis" between him and Mussolini had certainly been the one in 1928, triggered by the passage of the law on the organization and powers of the Grand Council, which, as we have seen[32], granted the supreme body of Fascism the right to intervene in both the succession to the throne and that to Mussolini. Faced with this attitude on the part of the sovereign and the fact that even on occasions of events that were even more serious politically and constitutionally (such as, in 1938, the establishment of the first Marshalate of the Empire and the introduction of racial legislation, not to mention the decision, in 1940, to enter the war) Vittorio Emanuele III consistently avoided a showdown and ultimately yielded to Mussolini's initiative; almost all historians have not only spoken of a substantial collaboration that characterized the relationship between the king and the "Duce" from October 1922 to July 1943, but have concluded that with the diarchic system established by Mussolini between 1928 and 1938 "the king had lost any normal opportunity to exercise his supreme function, having allowed all authority competing with that of the head of government to be nullified"[33]. In reality, this assessment is not only excessive but also renders the relationship between the king and the "Duce" during the period under consideration incomprehensible.

There is no doubt that Vittorio Emanuele III long shared much of Mussolini's policy, especially domestic policy. And, at least until the Ethiopian campaign, the same can be said of foreign policy, even though, personally, he would have preferred a more cautious approach and was initially opposed to the war in Africa.[34] Nor, given his upbringing, should this come as a surprise. Thus, to speak of his substantial collaboration with Mussolini during this period is not an exaggeration. It is, however, more difficult to believe that the diarchy had essentially made Mussolini's power superior to that of the sovereign and that the latter had allowed himself to be deprived of the ability to exercise his own power when necessary. Although he shared much of Mussolini's policy for many years, Victor Emmanuel was well aware that he had struck a compromise with his prime minister—one that the latter did not consider definitive at all and which, from the very beginning, he intended to modify in his own favor. However, after he had deemed it more appropriate to reappoint Mussolini in 1924–25—thus disappointing the expectations of the democratic opposition—he found himself in a position where he no longer felt strong enough to dismiss him, even if he wished to, without risking serious trouble with the opposition—which by then was overwhelmingly aligned against him and, in general, holding pro-republican positions—and to expose the country to the danger of a civil war. Under these

circumstances, for Victor Emmanuel, remaining tied to Mussolini—especially as long as the latter enjoyed the support of the majority of the country and pursued policies that, as noted, he largely shared—was far less dangerous. All the more so because, however much he sought—and partly succeeded—in marginalizing Mussolini in terms of actual power, Mussolini still needed the king to carry on the complex game of balances and mediations upon which the regime was founded. And this applied not only to the regime's traditional and supportive elements but also to the more restless and dynamic fascist factions within the movement, which would have liked to push the regime toward politically and socially more advanced and fully revolutionary outcomes. As with Mussolini, for the king, too, the main concern was above all to "hold out." The difference was that for him, "holding out" was easier. Both because, for the time being, Mussolini still needed his endorsement and protection and was not strong enough to oppose him explicitly; and because, barring exceptional and, for the time being, unforeseeable circumstances, waiting meant he could rely on the logic of the monarchical system: dynasties outlast individual men and their governments[35]; and, finally, because

34 Despite his caution, Victor Emmanuel III was, even in foreign policy, far from being prejudicially opposed—if the opportunity had arisen—to Italian territorial expansion. The 1933–35 diary of one of his aides-de-camp, S. Scaroni, *Con Vittorio Emanuele III* (Milan, 1954), is indicative in this regard. Take, for example, this statement by the sovereign from late 1934, as reported in the diary (p. 134): "Indeed, we must never let issues such as those of Malta, Nice, and the Canton of Ticino fall by the wayside. There's nothing to be done for now… But you never know. Situations can change, and when those names are on the international stage, it will be easier—when the opportunity arises—to demand their cession. What seems absurd today may not seem so tomorrow. There's always time to back down. It's good to always keep these names in mind… we must not give up. There's no need to make a fuss; it's enough to remember… to talk about them… then…"

The loss of power to which Mussolini subjected him was in fact marginal (even if at times morally burdensome): despite the support the regime enjoyed and the widespread popularity of Mussoliniism, the monarchy and the king personally still enjoyed considerable prestige, certainly among the ruling class (which, moreover, saw in them a valuable counterweight and a check on Mussolini's dynamism, authoritarianism, and "impulsive decisions"), but also in significant segments of the populace; and, above all, they could count on the loyalty of a very large portion of the armed forces, especially the navy and the army. And Vittorio Emanuele managed this loyalty with such care, skill, and—when necessary—firmness that it proves how he regarded it as the deciding factor in his relations with Mussolini; so much so that Mussolini never fully committed himself to the attempt to truly "fascistize" the army and navy, well aware that this would have led to a showdown between him and the king that both wanted to avoid.

In the second half of 1936, however, this type of relationship began to deteriorate and—at least in general terms, since for nearly two years nothing appeared to change—to undergo a profound transformation.

A few years ago, D. Grandi stated: "There is no doubt that Mussolini had the idea of getting rid of the monarchy."[36] Federzoni, for his part, was more explicit: "As of May 9, 1936, Mussolini had decreed in his heart the end of the monarchy."[37] One may debate the accuracy of the date; however, the substance of the statement and its connection to the conclusion of the Ethiopian conflict are beyond dispute. Without the new situation brought about by the victory in Africa, the "Duce" certainly could not have made such a decision, either psychologically or politically. Only now—as has been noted—could he

consider himself strong enough to seriously contemplate such a demanding undertaking and, at the same time, feel the need for it within the broader context of the issue of his succession.

Even in this new situation, however, the operation was far from easy. Its political, constitutional, and psychological foundations had to be carefully laid. It was necessary to create a vacuum around Victor Emmanuel and the dynasty, relegating them—in the eyes of the nation—to a role that was as purely ceremonial and "useless" as possible; to curtail their actual powers, convincing Italians, on the one hand, that the one who truly commanded and cared for them and the nation's destiny was the "Duce," and, on the other hand, that if the monarchy had seemed to play any role at all in recent decades, it had been solely due to the personal qualities of Victor Emmanuel III, the "soldier-king" who "had understood" that Mussolini represented "the Italy of Vittorio Veneto"—qualities that the crown prince, however, lacked[38]—and that, above all, not only had the monarchy had its day, but it now constituted a brake on the social dynamism of Fascism, on its desire to "reach out to the people" and to achieve "Italy's greatness," and that the sovereign himself could no longer keep pace with the new times, with the "age of Mussolini". And, finally, to seize the opportune moment to set the operation in motion. It is difficult to say when Mussolini anticipated this moment might be. In his aforementioned statement from a few years earlier, Grandi spoke of "the day after what he hoped would be the second victorious war." A rather vague indication, which could refer either to the end of the Spanish Civil War (on April 2, 1938, Mussolini told Ciano: "Once Spain is over, we'll talk about it"[39]) or to the end of World War II; but, in this case, Grandi must have based his assessment on information that came much later, since, as we shall see, Mussolini never considered a large-scale conflict in the short term until August 1939, and it is difficult to believe that before that date (which marked the temporary shelving of the plan) he intended to postpone the operation against the monarchy for so long. All the more so because, while at first his idea had been to wait for the sovereign's death ("I'm still waiting because the king is seventy years old, and I hope nature will help me," he told Ciano on July 17, 1938[40]), later on—roughly during the last months of 1938— Mussolini must have begun to feel an ever-more-intense need to speed up the operation and seize the first favorable opportunity to carry it out,41 to the point of indirectly letting his state of mind slip

38 In Fascist circles—and not only among the hardliners—hostility and contempt for Prince Umberto had long been widespread. In addition to being vain and incompetent, the crown prince was considered deeply hostile to Fascism. Further grounds for hostility toward the prince stemmed from his marriage to Princess Maria José, both because of her foreign origin and her coldness toward fascism. All of this gave rise on several occasions to underhanded campaigns, some of which were openly defamatory. See ibid., pp. 224 ff.

Word had already leaked abroad several months earlier that relations between Mussolini and Victor Emmanuel III were no longer as good as they once had been. This is evidenced, among other things, by a lengthy ad hoc report from the French chargé d'affaires in Rome, Blondel, to Y. Delbos dated January 10, 1938 (DDF, s. II, VII, pp. 861 ff.), in which the sources of friction were identified not only in the king's hostility toward attempts to "fascistize" the army but also in the regime's plans for constitutional reform and reform of the Senate (whose members, according to Blondel, were no longer to be appointed by the king and would have only an advisory role). Overall, however, the report spoke only of temporary, minor differences and concluded by stating that, despite the actual strength of monarchist sentiment in the country, Mussolini had "sufficient means of pressure to bring the Crown back into line [with him], except, of course, in the event of a military disaster or if serious social unrest were to break out"; which, moreover, seemed unlikely, despite the economic difficulties of the time.

even with foreigners. Highly significant in this regard is the advice he felt compelled to write to

Generalissimo Franco on July 6, 1939: “I consider the restoration of the monarchy to be supremely dangerous for the regime you so gloriously founded through so many sacrifices of blood”42. Multiple factors must have contributed to radicalizing Mussolini’s intentions. Some of these were likely of a predominantly psychological nature—that is, partly the result of the irritation caused by the increasing number of minor disagreements and incidents between him and the sovereign, which in other times would not have occurred or would have been much rarer, but which now indicated that Victor Emmanuel was on his guard[43]—and partly the result of his self-conviction that he was now the stronger party and that, therefore, the operation would be easier than it might seem; so much so that he went so far as to say that to eliminate the Savoys, all he would need to do was “mobilize two provinces: Forlì and Ravenna: 250,000 men” “or perhaps... simply putting up a poster”[44]. This was partly due to his ever-growing sense of self-confidence and his conviction that his political instinct allowed him to assess the situation better than anyone else and always resolve it to his advantage, and partly because the king’s skillful and cautious behavior toward him—increasingly alternating between admonitions, criticism, and stances against this or that aspect of his policies and the regime’s evolution—with a whole series of expressions of homage and esteem for his person45 —misled him, leading him to believe that Victor Emmanuel was far weaker and more submissive than he actually was, and to fail to understand that, on the contrary, the sovereign was anything but willing to consider himself sidelined or to allow himself to be sidelined; indeed, if the situation had required it and the circumstances had been favorable to him, he would not have been averse to taking matters back into his own hands. Somewhere between these psychological factors and those that were more strictly political, another influence that had no small impact was certainly that stemming from his condition of formal and psychological inferiority and, therefore, ultimately

45 Among these expressions of homage, two deserve special mention: a public one—the visit, together with Queen Elena, on June 8, 1938, to the “Duce’s” birthplace and to his parents’ graves, an act that was unprecedented in the history of the Savoy monarchy (see G. Artieri, *Cronaca del Regno d’Italia*, op. cit., II, pp. 552 ff.), and a private one: the offer, the following year, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Fasci di Combattimento, to Mussolini (who rejected both and considered the offer further proof of the king’s weakness and, at the same time, of his impotent animosity, given that the king, after his refusal, told him in no uncertain terms that it had been motivated by the desire to “take precautions to prevent the Fascists from repeating, with an unexpected gesture, the humiliation” suffered the previous year on the occasion of the creation of the first Marshal of the Empire) of a noble title or the appointment as Chancellor of the Empire (see G. Ciano, Diario, op. cit., pp. 271 ff. and 273).

political analysis of the situation in which Mussolini found himself during Hitler’s 1938 visit to Italy. Since the Führer was head of state, in all ceremonies attended by the king, the “Duce” had to yield his position of “equal rank” to Hitler—with the resulting damage to his pride and political prestige in the eyes of Hitler and the other National Socialist leaders being easy to imagine, especially considering that the Germans did nothing to make it easier for him, at least psychologically, swallowing this bitter pill; on the contrary, they made a point of not hiding from him how absurd they considered the relationship between him and the king to be, and even went so far as to make him understand that it was unworthy of him and, at worst, politically risky. Suffice it to say that—as Ciano noted in his diary[46]—Goebbels, walking through the throne room at the Quirinale and pointing to the king, went so far as to say: “Keep that piece of furniture made of velvet and gold. But put the Duce on it. That one over there is too small…” As for the more strictly political considerations, two must have carried decisive weight. The first stemmed from the fact that by 1938 it had become evident that Victor Emmanuel was increasingly inclined—depending on the circumstances—to step back, distance himself, and criticize, more or less explicitly, a whole series of aspects of Mussolini’s foreign and domestic policies, first and foremost his

gradual rapprochement with Germany.[47] The second was that, given this attitude of his, the sovereign and the monarchy were regaining strength and becoming the most important alternative point of reference to the "Duce's" policies—not only for increasingly broad sectors of the ruling class that supported him, but also for a certain number of Fascist figures, including even some who, until just a few years earlier, had made no secret of their republican and uncompromisingly anti-Fascist sentiments, such as, for example, Balbo48. If one takes all these factors into account, it is not difficult to understand why, in the final months of 1938, Mussolini had to—as has been said—begin to feel ever more intensely the need to hasten the dismantling of the monarchy. While until then the operation might have seemed less urgent to him—and more easily and safely achievable upon the death of Victor Emmanuel, linked above all to the issue of his own succession—it now took on a new significance and urgency. In fact, his very ability to proceed more or less freely along the political path he was increasingly

47 Victor Emmanuel was, among other things, opposed to intervention in Spain (as well as to the occupation of Albania), did not look favorably upon the racial campaign, and, above all, was hostile to the policy of alliance with Germany. See, on this last point, G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 108, 236, 269, 301, and 422.

decidedly gaining momentum. Nor, finally, can one underestimate the influence that the manner in which the affair of the first Marshal of the Empire had concluded in early April 1938 must have had on the "Duce."

The uproar that this affair caused at the time and the resonance it has had in subsequent memoirs and historiography make it appropriate to dwell on it at length.

The facts of the matter are simple and clear. On the afternoon of March 30, 1938, while the Senate was debating the budget estimates for the 1938–39 fiscal year for the Ministries of War, the Navy, and the Air Force, Mussolini delivered a impassioned and optimistic speech on the state and prospects of the armed forces. The speech was met with enthusiastic applause from nearly all the senators and the numerous deputies who, led by Costanzo Ciano, President of the Chamber of Deputies, and Achille Starace, Secretary of the National Fascist Party (PNF), crowded the gallery reserved for them. The enthusiasm was such that, at the end, Senators Badoglio, Piccio, and Thaon di Revel proposed that the speech be posted.

When Mussolini returned to Palazzo Venezia, the Senate resumed its proceedings as usual. The deputies, who had been summoned to Rome by Starace—since the Chamber was closed—went instead to Montecitorio and, during a very brief extraordinary session, approved by acclamation a bill (presented by Costanzo Ciano and other deputies) creating the rank of First Marshal of the Empire and conferring it upon the king and Mussolini.[49]

To complete the bill's parliamentary process, however, a vote by the Senate was also required. Marching in procession and singing "Giovinezza," the deputies then set off toward Palazzo Madama, determined to persuade the senators to follow their example. Federzoni—then President of the Senate—left us a description of those moments in his memoirs[50]:

49 The text of the law (later Law No. 240 of April 2, 1938) read: "Art. 1. The rank of First Marshal of the Empire is hereby established. Art. 2. This rank is conferred upon His Majesty the King-Emperor and upon Benito Mussolini, Duce of Fascism." See Parliamentary Proceedings, Chamber of Deputies, extraordinary session of Wednesday, March 30, 1938, year XVI, p. 4949.

C. Ciano presented the text of the bill as follows:

“Mr. President, While our hearts beat in unison with the Italian people at the words just spoken by the Duce in the Senate—words that highlight the titanic work he has accomplished during the first sixteen years of Fascism to strengthen the nation’s military might, a work that has already been crowned with victory (Ardent acclamations—Repeated shouts of: ‘Duce! Duce!), the voice of you and all Italians (Loud, prolonged applause), setting aside the formalities of every rule... (New, prolonged, general applause).

“Starace (Minister-Secretary of the National Fascist Party): Long live the Fascist Revolution! (Enthusiastic cheers).

“Mr. President... I submit the following bill for your approval:

“Mr. President, I propose that the approval of this bill take place exclusively by acclamation (Loud, enthusiastic ovations).” ’

Perhaps another hour had passed [since the end of Mussolini’s speech] when the Secretary-General of the Senate took the podium to inform me that Minister Ciano was on the phone and wished to speak with me urgently. Noting that none of the vice presidents was present at that moment, I instructed the Secretary General to let Galeazzo Ciano know that I could not leave and to ask him to convey to the Secretary General, if he saw fit, whatever he wished to communicate to me. A few minutes later, I received the reply: the Minister of Foreign Affairs was asking me not to adjourn the session, as there was extraordinary and urgent news. I had no idea what the news might be; but in the meantime, I sent some officials around the Senate chambers to urge my honorable colleagues not to leave, since at the end of the session we would have an important announcement. As we waited, and the senators—drawn by keen curiosity—hurried back to their seats, a sudden clamour of discordant voices was heard coming from one of the side galleries, only to cease immediately. A minute later, Galeazzo Ciano arrived, out of breath, to report to me that the Chamber, having convened on the spot, had approved by acclamation a law establishing the rank of First Marshal of the Empire, and that the King and the Duce had been invested with it:

“Note that His Majesty has been informed, consents, and approves. We beg you,” he added, still panting, “to have the law approved during this session, as it will be the crowning achievement of today’s great speech.”

And he handed me a small piece of paper on which the two articles of the “law” were written in pencil.

Meanwhile, all the galleries had filled up noisily in an instant, due to the rush of an audience that looked like a motley crew of drunks, so much did their bubbling merriment pour out in shouts and laughter. Ringing my poor bell with all my might—a bell I was used to employing to quell the minor incidents of the Lifetime Assembly with just two or three rings—I asked the secretary general:

“Who are those rude people?”

“They’re the members of Congress.”

“That many?!” I exclaimed in astonishment; and instinctively I turned my gaze toward the presiding

officer’s podium, toward the gallery reserved for the Chamber. There, President Costanzo Ciano had returned, this time with a small entourage of his own; responding to a gesture of impatience on my part at the racket made by his comrades in Montecitorio, he was waving his arms about with a comical miming of feigned despair. Starace, too, had returned to the ministers’ bench, no doubt to resume, if necessary, his role as conductor of the chorus.

Having thus set the scene, Federzoni (who in the preceding pages is careful to emphasize his complete lack of involvement in the planning of the entire coup) continues his account by detailing his reservations about such a “further and even more outrageous usurpation of the prerogatives of the Crown,” his uncertainties regarding the advisability of postponing the Senate vote until the following day (citing the lack of proper notification from the Speaker of the House), and his decision, finally, to submit the proposal to the Assembly, while attempting, at the very least, to preserve appearances. After this explanatory digression, his narrative continues as follows:

The Assembly, still buzzing with the success of the Duce’s speech, welcomed the announcement of the so-called bill with obvious favor. But immediately a raucous clamour rose from the galleries: “Acclamation! Acclamation!” They demanded that the Senate, too, conform to the expedited procedure practiced by the Fascist Chamber of Deputies. I once again sternly admonished the audience to be silent and not to disrupt the debate; then I proposed the motion of urgency and put it to a vote: it was approved without the slightest opposition. I subsequently proposed the appointment of a special committee to examine the bill. Shouts of protest erupted once more from the galleries, which I quelled with prompt energy: the Fascists in Montecitorio deplored the antiquated procedural delays of Palazzo Madama. Once the second proposal was also approved, and the committee appointed on the spot, I invited it to meet without delay and then report orally to the Assembly. The necessary suspension of the session lasted about twenty minutes, which seemed like an eternity to me, due to the arrogant and boorish behavior of many deputies and pseudo-deputies. To keep an eye on those indiscreet guests, contrary to traditional custom, I remained on the podium, standing next to my chair, and with justified severity reprimanded the unruly ones who had taken the liberty of insulting, without cause, certain senators seated at their posts. When the time was right, the committee reconvened: it had appointed the Vice President of the Senate, General of the Army Ferrari, as its chairman, and General Romei Longhena, the King’s honorary aide-de-camp, as rapporteur. Romei Longhena, being an accomplished orator, delivered his oral report quite effectively off the cuff, and it was met with loud applause. No other senator asked to speak. Finally, the articles were read and approved, and the bill was passed in its entirety. The Assembly’s acclamation confirmed to me that at least a large part of it was extremely pleased with everything that had been done:51 I had to assume that few yet realized the purpose and significance of the Chamber’s initiative. Starace shouted from the government bench: “Long live the Fascist Senate!” Was he meant to pay us a compliment? Or was he rather calling for the total “Fascistization” of the institution? 52.

51 Regarding this statement by Federzoni, it is interesting to note what E. Caviglia recorded on March 31, 1938, in his *Diario* (April 1925–March 1945), Rome 1952, p. 185: “I was not present. Federico Ricci told me today that there were outraged senators who regarded that outburst as an act of violence, a true act of oppression.”

Upon receiving notification that the bill just approved by the Chamber of Deputies had been forwarded, Federzoni put the motion for urgent consideration to a vote (approved by acclamation) and then proceeded to appoint a committee “tasked with reporting back in five minutes,” composed of Senators Ducei, Ferrari, Mosconi, Perrone Compagni, Piccio, Romei Longhena, and Ruffo di Calabria. Ten minutes later, after the committee had returned, the rapporteur, Senator Romei Longhena, took the

floor:

“Romei Longhena, rapporteur. Honorable comrades, following the lightning-fast victory in Ethiopia, where the Armed Forces—the iron instrument of our ardent faith in the Fatherland and in His Majesty the King-Emperor (Applause)—were guided by the genius and inspiring will of the Duce (Applause), following today’s speech, which all of Italy has acclaimed alongside us, and which has given not only Italians but the world the certainty of our invincible strength, the Special Committee, appointed by the President of the Senate, proposes that the bill be passed by acclamation. (Very lively, general, and prolonged applause).

“Mr. President, the bill establishing the rank of First Marshal of the Empire and conferring this glorious title upon the King-Emperor and the Duce of Fascism has been approved by the Senate by acclamation. (Very enthusiastic, general applause).

“Let us salute the two glorious First Marshals of the Empire.

“Hail to the King! (The Senate responds unanimously: “Long live the King!”).

“Hail to the Duce! (The Senate responds unanimously: “To Us!”).

“Starace, Minister-Secretary of the Party, on behalf of the Fascist Senate: Eia! Eia! Eia! (The entire Assembly responds: ‘Alalà!’).”

Once the session was over, a group of deputies and senators, including Costanzo Ciano and Federzoni, went to Palazzo Venezia to inform Mussolini of the law’s approval. According to Federzoni:

The Speaker of the Chamber began to report to Mussolini. The latter listened with that air of detachment from worldly matters that he usually assumed when receiving a tribute. Suddenly, Mussolini abruptly interrupted Costanzo Ciano, turning to me—who hadn’t said a word—and asked:

“The Senate has done everything by the book, hasn’t it?”

“As far as possible,” I replied.

Evidently, he already knew, but I have never been able to tell whether his words were meant as praise, irony, or reproach: they were probably a bit of all three. The Head of Government praised the—relative—correctness of the procedure; the anti-legalist par excellence laughed inwardly; the chronic revolutionary condemned those superstitions of the past. Such dissociations of his personality were not uncommon in Mussolini.

After leaving Palazzo Venezia, someone suggested we also go to the Quirinale; however, by the time the group arrived at the palace, it had dwindled to just a few people, who had to content themselves with leaving their business cards at the door.[53]

This is the account of the events, in their—so to speak—public aspect. Before moving on to describe Vittorio Emanuele III’s reaction to the law establishing the first Marshal of the Empire, it is necessary, however, to try to understand both why the Fascists sought the passage of such a law and why it was enacted in such an informal and even vaguely revolutionary manner (which, even in the particular climate of that time, it did not fail to cause quite a stir and elicit conflicting assessments), and what role

Mussolini played in the entire affair.

It is interesting to note that Gasparotto reports that, upon receiving the deputies and senators who had come to inform him of the law's approval, Mussolini "at first expressed doubts about the procedure followed" and was reassured only after listening to the two presidents. This clarifies (and, perhaps, corrects) what Federzoni wrote in his memoirs.

In the absence of other documentary sources, some clues for attempting to form an idea of the initial reactions sparked by the establishment of the first Marshalate of the Empire can be gleaned from the reports of one of the numerous "information and intelligence offices" that, during the years of the regime, were under the control of various Fascist groups and leading figures. We excerpt from the reports (dated April 2 and 8, 1938) of one of these "offices" (preserved in the De Felice Archive and hereafter referred to as Cremonesi Information) some opinions gathered by informants "in every corner of Rome":

- "The Sovereign must do whatever Fascism wants; it's sink or swim."

- "The Duce and the Sovereign are now equals."

- "One should understand that not only have the laws of the old regime been disregarded, but the laws created by the Fascist regime have also been violated, and the Grand Council has even been made a mockery of."

- "This revolution within a revolution does not reflect well on those who provoked it."

- "Quite a few military officers who attended the War College and veteran generals cannot come to terms with what has been said and what has been done."

- "The Sovereign himself should consider that, given the haphazard system by which ranks were created and bestowed, one fine day he might decide to revoke them."

There is no doubt that the dual vote—by the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate—took the king by surprise and that he had not been informed of it in advance. Victor Emmanuel III was made aware of what was happening only while the Chamber of Deputies was passing the resolution. Proof of this lies in what the sovereign himself said on April 2 to the Undersecretary to the Prime Minister, Medici del Vascello 54. From Federzoni's memoirs55 we also know that "the King had been informed at the very last moment, via a phone call from his chief aide-de-camp, General di Bernezzo, to whom he had laconically replied: 'That's fine.'" Mussolini, for his part—for what his testimony from the time of the Italian Social Republic (RSI) may be worth, when he wished to assert his full loyalty to the king until July 25—asserted in *Storia di un anno*[56] that it had been a "spontaneous initiative by certain groups of deputies and senators, following a speech by Mussolini, a speech that had aroused great enthusiasm."

However, it is impossible to believe it was a spontaneous initiative; perhaps a hasty one, yes (Mussolini's initial concerns about the formal validity of the vote might support this hypothesis), but certainly not spontaneous. Too many factors contradict this second hypothesis. There was the presence in Rome of so many deputies, even though the Chamber was in recess. There is Federzoni's assertion that the deputies had been summoned to Rome specifically by Starace.[57] And then there are as many as three accounts—from De Bono, in his diary and later at the Verona trial, and from Federzoni, also in

his memoirs—according to which Mussolini had been thinking for some time that he needed to assume —just as Hitler had done in Germany—command of all the armed forces and was seeking a legal expedient that would place him at the top of the military hierarchy. De Bono—aware of the "Duce's" plans—had suggested that Mussolini have himself appointed Marshal of Italy;58 however, according to Federzoni,59 Mussolini did not like the idea since, even with such a maneuver, "there would still remain the

58 On February 5, 1938, De Bono had written to Mussolini:

"Dear Head of Government

"This is not an obsession of mine; it is a conviction. Have you seen Hitler? You must be Marshal of Italy. You know that I have never advised you to do anything foolish, and, believe me, in certain matters my old instinct serves me well.

"Everyone who truly cares about you would be pleased by this.

"Needless to say, I always keep quiet about this with others. As always, yours, E. De Bono."

ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence (1922–1943), file 31/R, "E. De Bono," subfile 3, ins. D.

L. Federzoni, *Italy of Yesterday for the History of Tomorrow*, op. cit., p. 167.

"the annoyance of having a lower rank as marshal, compared to Badoglio, Pecori Giraldi, Caviglia, Gràziani, and De Bono himself"; it was then that the idea of the first marshal's rank was born. According to R. Montagna's account of the Verona trial,[60] —De Bono had even mentioned it to the king, without, of course, speaking of a possible conferral of the new rank on the sovereign as well. There can be no doubt about this, both because, otherwise, Victor Emmanuel III would have had every opportunity to make his hostility to such an equivalence known, and because, from De Bono's diary[61], we know that as late as March 24, the Quadrumvir was opposed to the direction the affair was taking and was still trying to patch it up, attempting to transform it into an unspecified "achievement of the army." Further confirmation that the events of March 30 were not spontaneous—and at the same time a reconstruction of their origins—can ultimately be found in the explanation Mussolini gave to N. D'Aroma in mid-April. This explanation, however, is clearly an after-the-fact account, unreliable, and intended to cast the king in a negative light while, by contrast, highlighting his own stance regarding Vittorio Emanuele's alleged knowledge of what was being prepared; it is, on the other hand, credible and significant insofar as it explicitly acknowledges the "Duce's" consent to the entire operation.

In light of these facts—which do not point to a spontaneous initiative, dictated

According to N. d'Aroma, *Ventanni insieme. Vittorio Emanuele e Mussolini* (Bologna, 1957, pp. 257 ff.), Mussolini is reported to have said: "Let's talk once and for all about this business of the Marshal rank. I want you to know, first of all, some very sincere and indisputable facts. First: I had never even thought about such matters. Second: I would certainly have rejected anyone who had proposed to seek such an appointment for me."

"However, an event occurred that left no room for further speculation. You need to know this in order to understand. Starace and Costanzo Ciano came up with this rather outlandish idea shortly after the

Empire’s recognition. He mentioned it to me one morning, but I flatly rejected it.

“It seemed—and indeed was—a thing of the past, when one day, from reliable sources, I learned that the King had become aware of this long-forgotten proposal and had, contrary to his usual reserve, bitterly deplored it. I didn’t give the matter much thought, but at a certain point, I realized that the Monarch harbored a spirit of hostility—and, what’s even more ridiculous, a sense of having won a battle. And against whom? Against me.

“As if I had cunningly had the proposal put forward and then, in the end, had harbored some further fear of his hostile attitude. Faced with new information that fully confirms what I am telling you, I summoned Starace and personally authorized the appointment to proceed by any means—parliamentary or otherwise—in order to make it clear to these Savoys that while deference is one thing, moral courage is quite another.

“This Italy—powerful, full of prestige, and a leading player on the world stage—was not truly built on the royal signatures at the bottom of decrees; and that is why the corporal you favor had to—and wanted to—be made a Marshal.”

Galeazzo Ciano’s diary—in the published text—contains no entry for March 30–31, 1938, nor any mention, in the preceding days, of the issue of the first marshal’s rank. As D. Susmel also noted in *Vita sbagliata di Galeazzo Ciano* (Milan, 1962, p. 92), this should come as no great surprise; “in all likelihood, references and notes were made but suppressed at the author’s behest.”

We must speak not of a political initiative born of the enthusiasm of the moment and not carefully considered in terms of its political consequences, but rather of the implementation—perhaps somewhat hasty—of an idea long cherished at the top of the Fascist hierarchy. It was a political initiative whose practical implementers were—as all the literature agrees—PNF Secretary Starace and the two Cianos: Costanzo, President of the Chamber of Deputies, and Galeazzo, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Having established this, however, it is necessary to try to understand the political rationale (the notion that this was merely a manifestation of Mussolini’s ambition can be ruled out: Mussolini never had any passion for ranks or titles) behind the decision to create the rank of First Marshal and to confer it not only on Mussolini but also on Victor Emmanuel III.

According to the long-prevailing view, the intention was to lay the groundwork for Mussolini to assume supreme command of all the armed forces. From this perspective, both memoirs and the literature on the subject have closely linked the establishment of the rank of First Marshal to the speech Mussolini delivered to the Senate on March 30 regarding the state of the armed forces, placing particular emphasis on one passage from it. This62:

The coordination of the various branches of the armed forces and the preparation of logistical resources—as well as, on a global scale, the harmonization of the unified action of the Army, Navy, and Air Force—can never be sufficiently achieved to implement what I call the unified conduct of total war, that is, rapid and relentless.

In Fascist Italy, the problem of unified command—which plagues other countries—has been resolved. The political-strategic directives of the war are established by the Head of Government. Their implementation is entrusted to the Chief of the General Staff and the subordinate bodies. History, including our own, shows us that discord between the political and military conduct of war has always

been fatal.

In Fascist Italy, this danger does not exist. In Italy, the war—as it was in Africa—will be led, under the king's orders, by one man alone: by the speaker himself, if, once again, destiny reserves this grave task for him.

Even a man as highly experienced in military matters as Marshal Caviglia seems, from his diary,[63] to share this view. And the same interpretation is easily discerned in the pages dedicated to the conferral of the rank of First Marshal of the Empire upon Mussolini by the Fascist Legislature during the 29th Legislature, an official publication on the activities of the two branches of Parliament edited by the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. In these pages,[64] after quoting the passage from Mussolini's March 30 speech just mentioned and noting that the two legislative assemblies, by approving by acclamation the bill proposed by the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies regarding the creation of the rank of First Marshal of the Empire, had sought to "give concrete form to the nation's recognition" of the "Duce's" work, it is in fact stated:

In connection with the conferral upon the Duce of the highest rank in the military hierarchy, it is worth noting the profound evolution that has taken place in the structure of the Nation's Supreme Command during wartime... Thus, in the Fascist system, just as that strange anomaly—in which peacetime military structures were entirely different from wartime military structures—has disappeared, so too has the harmful and inconceivable dualism between the political government and the military government of the nation at war, between the Army High Command and the political leadership. In this ironclad unity of purpose, command, and direction in the hands of the Duce, Head of Government—in this homogeneity of forces and institutions—lies the best guarantee of victory.

In reality, reducing the "First Marshal" operation merely to a maneuver intended to lay the groundwork for Mussolini's assumption of supreme command of the armed forces is to trivialize it politically and to preclude the possibility of understanding its true scope and significance.

The gravity of the law did not lie in the creation of the new rank, nor in the fact that it was conferred upon Mussolini, but in the fact that it was also conferred upon the sovereign. To argue—as Federzoni[65] did—that "one could not fail to show a certain deference, albeit purely formal, to the King" and that, therefore, the architects of the maneuver had to confer the new rank on Victor Emmanuel III as well is politically and constitutionally absurd. The best evidence lies in the behavior and words of the sovereign himself.

On the evening of March 30, Costanzo Ciano and Federzoni requested an audience with the king to officially inform him of the approval of the new law. The audience took place the following morning at eleven o'clock.[66] The sovereign was courteous but cold toward the two presidents. He spoke with them for only a few minutes and made it clear that he had not appreciated the gesture. "It was," he said, "a very kind thought on my behalf. Perhaps it wasn't necessary. In any case, thank you very much."[67]

The king, however, had been much harsher and more agitated half an hour earlier with Mussolini. At first, he had even refused to sign

66 The exact times of this audience and of the two with Mussolini, on March 31 and April 4, have been ascertained based on the diary of the king's first aide-de-camp: ACS, Royal House Archive, Office of the First Aide-de-Camp, Diary, on the respective dates.

the promulgation of the law; then he had almost relented and hinted that he would eventually sign, though not without first stating his true thoughts. According to Mussolini's account of the conversation:[68]

"After the Grand Council's law," he said, "this law is another fatal blow to my sovereign prerogatives. I could have granted you any rank as a sign of my admiration, but this equalization places me in an untenable position, because it is another blatant violation of the kingdom's constitution."

"You know," Mussolini objected, "that I do not care for these things, which can be considered mere formalities. The sponsors believed that by conferring this rank upon me, Your Majesty would automatically be awarded it as well."

"No. The Chambers cannot take such initiatives."

The king was pale with rage. His chin was trembling.

"This is the worst of them all! Given the imminence of an international crisis, I do not wish to add fuel to the fire, but in other times, rather than suffer this affront, I would have preferred to abdicate. I would tear up this double Greek symbol."

Once the audience was over, Mussolini—"somewhat surprised by this outburst of fury" and evidently wishing to protect himself in some way—then turned to the president of the Council of State, Prof. Santi Romano, for a constitutional "opinion." Within two days, Romano provided him with an opinion confirming its full legitimacy.[69]

On April 2, as soon as he received the "opinion," Mussolini forwarded the original to the king.[70] The undersecretary of the

70 Copies of the "opinion" were also sent that same day to the Speakers of the Chambers, C. Ciano and Federzoni, to the Secretary of the PNF, Starace, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, G. Ciano, and to the Undersecretary of the Interior, Buffarini-Guidi.

The "opinion" was sent to Federzoni with this "personal confidential" note from Mussolini's private secretary, O. Sebastiani:

"Your Excellency, doubts have been raised at an embassy regarding the constitutionality of the recent appointments.

"Having submitted—in strict confidence—the question to the President of the Council of State, he replied with the note that, by order of the Duce, I am enclosing a copy of herewith."

That same day, Federzoni replied with this "confidential" note: "Dear Comrade Sebastiani, I thank you for the important communication you have sent me, by forwarding to me today, on the Duce's orders, the text of the memorandum from the President of the Council of State regarding the constitutionality of the recent appointments.

"I am not aware that anyone in the Senate has raised the slightest objection on this matter, not least because the atmosphere of ardent enthusiasm sparked by the great speech of March 30 was such as to dispel any hypothetical doubt regarding the formal regularity of the subsequent resolution.

“Nevertheless, it is certain that the considerations put forward by His Excellency Santi Romano, in his dual capacity as Head of the supreme legal-administrative body and as a distinguished scholar of our public law, could prove to be of extraordinary interest and help to further clarify and reinforce the conviction on this matter among the most prominent and influential comrades in the Senate.

“Specifically, given the sensitivity of the matter, I kindly ask you to let me know whether I am authorized to arrange for the members of the Presiding Board (possibly even just the vice presidents) and some of the most authoritative figures in the Senate to review the document in confidence. — I would be grateful for a brief reply on this matter. — Fascist greetings.”

Presidency of the Council of State, Medici del Vascello, to whom Mussolini also handed a note for the sovereign:

Your Majesty, I am sending you this note from the President of the Council of State, which I, though a layperson, consider exhaustive.

Please accept my most devoted regards.

The dry tone of this note is consistent with what Galeazzo Ciano reports under the same date in his diary[71]:

The matter of the Marshal of the Empire has some fallout. It seems that at the Royal Household, the illegality of the matter was discussed. Mussolini requested an opinion from the Council of State: everything is fully legal. He sent it to the King with a very curt letter. He told me: “Enough. I’m fed up with it. I do the work and he signs. I regret that what you did on Wednesday was perfect from a legal standpoint.” I replied that we could go further at the first opportunity. This will certainly be when the King’s respectable signature is replaced by the Prince’s less respectable one. The Duce nodded and, in a low voice, said: “Once Spain is over, we’ll talk about it...”

Having hinted three days earlier that—given the international situation, as it was the day after the Anschluss—he would sign the law, Victor Emmanuel III could now do nothing more. To Undersecretary Medici del Vascello, however, he repeated—and with extreme firmness—his protest and, broadening the discussion, reproached the government for its now-established practice of taking even “very important” measures and announcing “substantial” reforms without even informing him in advance. In the end, he signed the law, but not without first reaffirming his hesitation and stating—a point of great importance to us—that “if he had been forewarned of the matter in any way, he would, within the scope of his constitutional role, have suggested conferring upon the Duce the title of Marshal General of the Empire—a title higher than that of First Marshal and one that also corresponds to notable historical precedents”—and that, in any case, he reserved the right to discuss the entire matter again with Mussolini. But regarding this conversation, better than anything we could say, here is what Medici del Vascello reported in writing to Mussolini immediately after leaving:

In accordance with the Duce’s orders, I went today at 4:30 p.m. to His Majesty the King-Emperor to deliver to him the opinion of the President of the Council of State regarding the regularity of the Chamber’s session in which the law establishing the rank of First Marshal of the Empire and conferring that rank upon His Majesty and the Duce was approved.

His Majesty first asked me to thank the Duce for the courteous manner of the communication and then

reviewed the opinion, of which he stated he took note.

Once the official part of the audience was over, the Sovereign, who appeared concerned, detained me for a confidential conversation.

The King spoke most warmly of the Duce and affirmed his highest personal esteem for him, whom he considers a sure guarantee for the country's future and, like no other, worthy of the highest responsibilities.

His Majesty did not, however, hide the fact that he would have preferred to have been informed in advance of the initiative, of which he instead learned only at 6:25 p.m., when the Chamber was about to pass its resolution, and he added that, had he been forewarned in any way, he would have, within the scope of his constitutional authority, suggested conferring upon the Duce the title of General Marshal of the Empire—a title higher than that of First Marshal and one that also corresponds to notable historical precedents.

In this regard, His Majesty alluded to the fact that very important measures are being adopted and substantial reforms announced without him, however, having received any prior notice.

Finally, His Majesty did not hide his hesitation regarding the precedent set by the sudden convening of the Chamber, a precedent which—in his view—could be cause for concern in the distant future and which does not appear to be in keeping with Italy's traditions.

In this regard, His Majesty made it clear that he is not concerned only when decisions of such great importance can be made personally by the Duce.

At the conclusion of the conversation, I deemed it appropriate to point out to His Majesty that, on this occasion, the decision was so sudden and swift that not even the Duce was consulted in advance, making it consequently impossible to notify His Majesty.

After a few other minor remarks, I invited His Majesty to sign the law appointing the two First Marshals of Italy, overcoming the hesitation he had clearly expressed to me due to the fact that the law concerns—among other things—his person.

Finally, His Majesty indicated that he reserved the right to discuss the matter again with the Duce, to clarify his thoughts, on Monday, the 4th of this month, during the customary signing of legislative measures.

After the "opinion" of S. Romano was delivered to the sovereign, the matter of the First Marshal's office was officially concluded on April 4. When Mussolini arrived at 10:30 a.m. for his customary audience with the king, the latter made a point of letting him know that the constitutional "opinion" of the President of the Council of State had not caused him to change his mind and that he had signed only to avoid provoking a crisis at such a delicate moment on the international stage. According to Mussolini,[72] Vittorio Emanuele, in the throes of a "fit of rage," is said to have remarked:

Professors of constitutional law, especially when they are timid opportunists like Professor Santi Romano, always find arguments to justify the most absurd theses: that is their profession; but I continue to stand by my

opinion. Moreover, I have not concealed this state of mind from the two presidents of the Chambers, so that they might convey it to the instigators of this affront to the Crown, which must be the last.

Now that we have covered not only the public events but also their developments and background, we have all the elements needed to arrive at an overall assessment of the affair and, what interests us most, its true political motivations. The claim—as we have seen—that Mussolini intended to use this to lay the groundwork for securing supreme command of the armed forces is not credible. From this perspective, the conferral of the new rank on Mussolini did not constitutionally resolve the problem. The solution could only be political—as would have been the case, at the time, with the delegation of powers—and, for all intents and purposes, the fact that Mussolini held no specific rank or was a field marshal meant nothing. And—even assuming it could have meant anything—it is unclear why Mussolini, who was well aware of the weaknesses, the pseudo-constitutional formalism of Victor Emmanuel III, and the king's hostility toward an equalization of their positions in the military hierarchy, would have made such a misstep, such as having the new rank conferred on both of them, when the sovereign would not have objected (the words he spoke to Medici del Vascello attest to this, and we do not believe they can be considered a post hoc polemical argument) to conferring on him a new rank that would place him hierarchically above the five existing marshals. Equally implausible is another explanation put forward by Federzoni—namely, that Mussolini intended (in addition to laying the groundwork to secure supreme command) to severely undermine the prerogatives and prestige of the Senate,[73] given the vast disproportion between this hypothetical objective and its political cost. Certainly closer to the truth is another explanation that Federzoni puts forward alongside the previous one—though still subordinate to the "military" one—namely, that the promoters of the "first marshal" initiative aimed to "reaffirm once again the principle of diarchy."[74] We say "closer to the truth" because it is our conviction that i) to understand the entire affair, one must rule out other explanations that were either entirely unrelated to it, concerned only some of its protagonists (such as De Bono), or were even put forward by some of them post factum to justify in some way their participation in it or their passive acceptance of it (such as Federzoni); and that, in any case, they do not apply to Mussolini (who, at most, perhaps used them instrumentally to mask the true significance of the operation in the eyes of those most closely tied to the monarchy); 2) that the true objective was not to validate the diarchy—which by then was already a fully established reality—but, on the contrary, to proceed with its dismantling for the sole benefit of the "Duce"75; 3) that, most likely, the origins of the "First Marshalate" operation are to be found in the session of the Grand Council held March 10–14, during which, in addition to the general criteria on which the transformation of the old Chamber of Deputies into the new Chamber of Fasci and Corporations was to be based, it had been resolved—and this was far more important—to "proceed with the completion of the constitutional reform by updating the Statute of the Kingdom"76. Only from this perspective is it possible to place the event within its broader context, grasp its true significance, and understand why, for both of its two main protagonists, it marked a political turning point in their relationship.

To this end, it is particularly important to reconstruct the general context, both—as we have already done—with regard to Mussolini and with regard to the broader sphere of the Fascist leadership, as well as the other minor, yet no less significant, initiatives along the same lines that preceded and followed it.

For the sake of clarity, let us begin with the latter. Although they appear to be independent of one another and are generally underestimated by scholars of this phase of Fascism, they actually form a single framework and perspective both among themselves and in relation to that of the first Marshal's term. The first was the approval of Decree-Law No. 4 of January 11, 1937, by which the secretary-

general of the PNF was granted the title and functions of Minister-Secretary of State. Although seemingly of little importance and almost routine in nature (as early as 1928–29, it had been established that the Secretary of the PNF could, by royal decree proposed by the head of government, be called upon to participate in meetings of the Council of Ministers), it was in reality, to quote *Fascist Legislation*[77], "a measure of high revolutionary idealism, which definitively cemented, even in the field of constitutional law, the Party to the State and which sought to enshrine the strengthening of the Party's functions as an organ of the State." Closely linked to this measure and to the establishment of the first Marshal's Office (even though the connection was not emphasized and escaped the notice of many) were Royal Decree No. 513 of April 28, 1938, which promulgated the new PNF statute approved the previous month by the Grand Council,[78] and Law No. 129 of January 19, 1939, which established the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations. The former definitively elevated the PNF to the status of a constitutional institution,[79] but, more importantly, through these two measures (and, to some extent, already through Decree-Law No. 1839 of October 27, 1937, which had established the GIL), the title of "Duce" began to take on a legal and potentially constitutional significance that it had not previously possessed. It no longer referred merely to the party leader, "but to the Duce of Fascism—that is, the guide, the Supreme Leader of the Regime, who is now inextricably identified with the State." This is how *La legislazione fascista*80 put it in 1939. Even more significant is what an authoritative Fascist constitutionalist, Senator Pietro Chimienti, wrote in Mussolini's personal journal, *Gerarchia*[81], in July 1938. Discussing the "constitutional" title of "Duce" bestowed upon Mussolini in a series of new laws (including the one establishing the rank of Marshal), Chimienti asserted that these laws had confirmed "in a manner that could no longer be misinterpreted the constitutional position of the Duce of Fascism," so that "the bond between the Monarch, Head of State, and the Head of Government in his capacity as Duce and the PNF is thereby specified and strengthened"; and from this premise—apparently in line with the reality of the diarchy—he drew inspiration for a series of observations on the new type of bond that, in his view, had been established between the monarchy and "the new type of Fascist state" and to "clarify how and whether the constitutional title of Duce of Fascism can and does influence the exercise of the royal prerogative to appoint and dismiss the Prime Minister and Head of Government"; observations through which he reached a conclusion that—if implemented—would inevitably have led to a breakdown of the diarchic balance so clearly unfavorable to the monarchy as to render it politically powerless and constitutionally useless: the title of "Duce" had no personal value, but rather a constitutional one:

75 A note by Ciano seven months later is significant in that it confirms this assessment: "The Duce speaks of the difficulties increasingly posed by the 'diarchy' of Fascism and the monarchy... The Duce comments on the situation harshly and implies that if the opportunity arises to put an end to this state of affairs, he will not let it slip by" (G. Ciano, Diario, op. cit., p. 208).

If the regime's revolutionary policy must—as it must—continue; if the Grand Council of Fascism and the PNF must remain in place to carry out and implement this policy within and alongside the state and under the directives of the Head of Government, then it is technically necessary for there to be a Leader, a Guide of all the moral and material forces of the nation, organized for this purpose. Fascist public law has conferred a constitutional character upon this Leader by bestowing upon him the title of Duce.

On the other hand, when one assesses the two brand-new political institutions—the Grand Council of Fascism and the PNF—in their proper constitutional context, it does not seem possible to reach conclusions different from those contained in these pages.

The initiatives and directives required for the experiments aimed at implementing the Regime's policy would lack a legal basis were it not for the close constitutional link between the actions of the Duce and those of the Prime Minister and Head of Government.

For example, how could the PNF—this imposing, representative, and highly responsive institution of the Regime—carry out its tasks of testing and implementing, within an experimental field as vast as the nation itself, the policy directives outlined by the Head of Government within the Grand Council of Fascism, if the Head of the PNF were not also the Head of Government?

Even in the event that the office of Head of Government and "Duce" were to become vacant due to unforeseen and unpredictable causes, "so that the Crown could not have received advice from the incumbent regarding the appointment of a successor, the person chosen by the Crown from among the names indicated on the predetermined list referred to in Article 13 of the Law on the Grand Council of Fascism, also holds the title of Duce."

As can be seen, Chimienti's discussion of the constitutional role of the "Duce" ultimately tied back to and culminated in the issue of Mussolini's succession and the continuity of the regime. In this sense, however, Chimienti's article—published, not coincidentally, in *Gerarchia*—constituted an exception. Precisely because they now considered this issue the most critical of all and the most important problem to be resolved as soon as possible, Mussolini and the Fascist leadership did not want it discussed publicly—both to avoid alarming that segment of public opinion that identified primarily with the monarchy, and to prevent discouragement and ill-advised stances among the Fascists, among whom, albeit generally in rudimentary forms, the issue was spreading and causing concern.[82] A typical example is what happened at the end of 1937,

82 Among the various accounts that could be cited, we wish to mention one taken from a "memo for the Duce" by the Minister of Popular Culture dated August 19, 1938 (ACS, Ministry of Popular Culture, b. n, file 131). The note observed that the coincidence between the news of a serious plane crash that had occurred the previous day in Varese and that of one of Mussolini's usual recreational flights had caused quite a stir and raised concerns, and it concluded—with a good dose of rhetoric, yet also bringing the issue into sharp focus— "The Duce cannot fail to take into account this state of mind, which is much more widespread in Italy than he believes. Many wonder why, given his composure and sensitivity, he is unable to restrain and limit these frequent risks to his life.

"In Fascist circles, Undersecretary Valle is reproached—not without vehemence and bitterness—for lending himself with too much passive, and indeed unwelcome, acquiescence to the Duce's flight training activities; and blame is placed on his other, more direct collaborators —Ciano, Starace, Sebastiani, and Alfieri—are blamed for failing to intervene appropriately with the Duce, thus echoing this general sentiment.

When the Roman periodical *Fronte Unico* published an article[83] addressing the issue, it argued, among other things, that the secretary of the PNF was the "deputy Duce" and, in practice, a sort of "Duce in the making" and consequently "the future Head of Fascism" and "future Head of Government." Probably due to the limited circulation of "Fronte Unico," the article did not provoke any immediate reaction,[84] but when, shortly thereafter, the far more authoritative and widely read magazine "Lo Stato" took issue with it,[85] the reaction was swift: a terse telegram from Minister Alfieri instructed all prefects to "urge all periodicals, including daily newspapers, to strictly refrain from addressing constitutional issues concerning the succession of the Head of Government"[86].

The fact that the issue was not discussed explicitly and publicly does not, however, mean that the question of “the post-Mussolini era,” his succession, and the issue of the monarchy were not at the center of attention and concern not only for Mussolini but also for a large part of the Fascist leadership, nor that the Fascist press87 did not circulate discussions on the matter in indirect and allusive forms—though this did not

“The Duce’s life today is the very life of the Nation. It is certainly no mere literary or rhetorical flourish to say that the Duce has changed the course of history; the Italian people demand—and this demand is echoed in other parts of the world as well—that the Duce prevent this course from being interrupted in any way.”

84 The same had happened a year earlier when, on July 26, 1936, the now-fascistized Parisian newspaper *Il Merlo* published an article signed by Livio Ausoni [Giulio Butticci], “Empire and Freedom: Conquest or Bestowal?”, in which the issue was framed in even more concrete terms: “With the creation of the Empire (and its de facto recognition by foreign powers through the lifting of sanctions), the various social, economic, and demographic—that is, material—problems of the Regime have found the necessary foundation for their comprehensive solution. Problems of a different nature now remain to be resolved, and among these is the one that, in a certain sense, sums them all up: the problem of the definitive drafting of the Italian Constitution. This is an essential issue for the culmination of fascism’s revolutionary work and, in a certain sense, urgent not only in view of the peace-building efforts required by the postwar settlement and the organization of the Empire, but also and above all because the Duce of Italy and of Fascism, the Founder of the Empire, is nevertheless a mortal man, for whom, moreover, a worthy successor cannot be found in any single individual or group of individuals, but only in institutions that offer the greatest guarantees that the fruits and teachings of Fascism will not be lost but will remain indefinitely as the political heritage and foundation of the Italian people’s way of life.

“Therefore, in light of these requirements, the nation’s Constitution must enable the regime to function on its own, regardless of who is in charge of the government. But this, in our view, can only happen if the future Constitution is the genuine expression of the will of the Italian people—that is, if it is drafted and promulgated by a Fascist Constituent Assembly, elected by the Italian people, who have been imbued with and transformed by Fascism. That a Chamber created through the plebiscite system is utterly unsuited to fulfilling this constituent function is, we believe, evident to anyone who reflects on the fact that both the current and the previous Chamber have proven to be devoid of any vitality, serving merely as a constitutional fiction with purely bureaucratic powers imposed upon them by the old and now obsolete Albertine Statute.”

For the author’s identification, see G. Butticci, *Dal Risorgimento al Partito d’Azione. Ricordi e cronache di un quarantennio* (From the Risorgimento to the Action Party: Memories and Chronicles of Four Decades), Lanciano 1980, p. 157.

87 A significant example of how much the “post-Mussolini” era was on the minds of the Fascists is provided by the concluding paragraph of C. Costamagna’s *Storia e dottrina del Fascismo* (Turin 1938)

less significant for us, since, upon careful examination, these positions reveal a consistent tendency to modify—slowly but substantially— the image of the relationship between Fascism and the monarchy, the roles of the sovereign and the “Duce” within the regime, and the very concept of the regime as they had been established in previous years—and to promote the idea that everything now revolved around

Mussolini and that the monarchy no longer had a role or function of its own.

The most ardent advocates of abolishing the monarchy were Starace and Galeazzo Ciano, along with their respective power factions. The latter acted with a good deal of self-interest, concerned with securing his role as heir apparent as firmly as possible and, when the time came, his succession to his father-in-law; with less personal interest, but—as was his nature—with less timing and too much zeal, the former, so much so that, once the operation to appoint the first marshal had been successfully completed, Starace would have liked to proceed further, rushing ahead without much hesitation, confident that, given his prestige, Mussolini could get away with anything and that any opposition could be easily overcome.[88] More or less explicitly, however, the issue was on the agenda among the entire Fascist leadership between 1937 and 1939, albeit with differing motivations, attitudes, states of mind, pressures, and concerns, depending on how the various figures and groups assessed Mussolini's policies and the regime's prospects. As far as we know, the most heated phase of the debate must have occurred in the months immediately following the incident involving the first marshal's rank, in the spring and summer of 1938, roughly until the Munich Crisis pushed it somewhat into the background —or, at least, made it one aspect of a larger and more urgent problem, that of Italian-German relations —thereby accentuating the divisions and conflicts surrounding it between those who approved of Mussolini's policies and those who, opposing them, saw the monarchy as a point of reference worth promoting. In this regard (p. 454), in support of the need to proceed with the organization of the "New State," Machiavelli's passage is cited: "It is not, therefore, the well-being of a republic or a kingdom to have a prince who governs prudently while he lives; but one who orders it in such a way that, even upon his death, it may be preserved."

" Given the concerns that Starace's extremist stance (which lasted practically until the outbreak of World War II forced the issue to be set aside) aroused among the moderates at the top of the Fascist leadership, it is significant what De Bono noted on May 7, 1938 (ACS, E. De Sono, Diary, q. 43): "The party—aka Starace—is playing a dangerous card in this regard. It would lead to civil war, because the country stands with the King. The King was deeply offended by the Marshal of the Empire… who was imposed on him. And he's right… I'm told he suffers from being sidelined in this way and has complained about it; it's said he's even spoken of abdication… Mussolini knows; but it's useless—he's a prisoner now. Costanzo Ciano is also troubled by this—not least because his son is letting himself be led astray by Starace. Conclusion? One way or another, Starace must be eliminated. But who will make the Leader understand this? How can we persuade him that, in essence, he has an enemy right beside him?"

Regarding this period, some of Bottai's notes preserved in his diary[89] are quite interesting and revealing.

June 23, 1938. For his own sake. Galeazzo's tireless efforts to build his legacy continue. Last Tuesday, at the Campidoglio, while German Minister Frank spoke of the Führer as an institution—no longer provisional and tied to Hitler's person, but permanent (the Führertum, in short)—Galeazzo swayed in his seat and, smugly, whispered to me: "That's right!"

June 26, 1938. The issue of relations between the King and the Duce—which concerns Vittorio Emanuele II and Mussolini personally, but even more so the institutional relationship between the King and the Duce—has regained some prominence.

For serious reasons, first and foremost, those deeply concerned about the fate of the Regime and the "continuity" of the Revolution hope for a clear, upright, and precise framework. The relationship

between Victor Emmanuel and Mussolini is a settled matter, in the sense of a cordial understanding between the two men, despite the difficulty of reconciling the dual roles of King and Duce within that relationship. The legal flexibility of the Italian people has ultimately normalized the King-Duce pairing, deriving new values and meanings from it.

This is what we must aim for in order to reach a definitive solution. To think that the same pairing is possible with another pair of individuals is, to say the least, risky. But it is possible to translate its inner essence into a precise institution, reducing it to a single entity. No longer a juxtaposition of King and Duce, nor even a sum of the two, but a true synthesis, in which the powers and duties of the Duce are united in the person of the King. A King, in short, not absolute in the ancient sense, nor constitutional according to liberal constitutions. A King of a totalitarian state, the expression of the organized people.

June 29, 1938. My train of thought was interrupted by a remark—perhaps a trivial one—tossed off by Rossini as he accompanied me to the Milan train station to board the train to Germany. He had met the King at Montello. He had found him healthy, serene, and "on top of things." The same impression I'd had during my days in Romagna. He was perfectly in control of his extremely difficult situation as the "constitutional" king of a country no longer governed by a "constitution," but by a personal "regime" centered on the Prime Minister. Or rather, on the "President," as they call him at Court with old-fashioned orthodoxy (even Mrs. Rachele says, "the President"). "But," Rossini said suddenly, "Umberto will resolve the situation. He will be the Duce."

A banal statement. But on reflection, it glows with a certain insight. The advent of the "masses" onto the political scene replaces the concept of "constitution" with that of "organization." A king confined by the constitution is just as inconceivable in our time as an absolute monarch. The modern state demands at its helm an "organizer"—a leader who knows how to continually direct its energies and forces, in their ever-changing manifestations, from the economic to the social. Economy and sociality: these are two prevailing factors in modern states, which demand constant "organization," always taking new forms and following new rules. "Organization" requires an "organizer": that is, a leader whose power is power in action—a doing, an acting, a direct and immediate ordering—not necessarily bound by the letter of laws or constitutions; a power, [illegible], that is more organizational than legal, aimed at creating forms, entities, and institutions rather than defining their relationships in formulas. In this case, in our state, that figure is the Duce.

Setting aside the person of Mussolini, can the "Duce" as a permanent institution be conceived as attached to any other person—other than, in a monarchy, the monarch?

July 12, 1938. There are also direct repercussions on our domestic politics. During Hitler's visit to Italy, the respective positions of the Führer and the Duce have rekindled among the zealots their anxieties regarding Mussolini's standing, which they claim has been diminished by the contact between the Führer, as Head of the Reich, and the King, Head of State. The Nazis in his entourage—the silent Hess, the smirking Goebbels, the ruddy-faced Frank—spoke openly of dynastic anachronisms, mocking the Court, its etiquette, and its ceremonial protocols. There were minor incidents regarding precedence; and even a more serious incident when a courtier admonished Hitler not to keep the King waiting. Murmurs and gossip of no importance in themselves; yet sufficient to bring serious issues to the surface.

Thus, on the trip from Rome to Florence, Galeazzo led the anti-monarchist discourse, with Alfieri reluctant yet smiling in acquiescence, and Starace nodding—whether out of cynicism or incomprehension: "The current King is beyond question. He fought in the war; he accepted Fascism.

He is loved by the Italians. But when he passes away? The question will arise then."

As for the positions taken by the press, we will limit ourselves—among the many that could be mentioned—to citing two of the most significant, given the publication in which they appeared, *Gerarchia*, and which both date to 1937, that is, the initial phase of the indirect discourse on the monarchy. The first, penned by Sergio Panunzio,90 was more elaborate in nature—somewhere between historical and theoretical—and approached the subject from a considerable distance, framing it almost more as a warning to the monarchy than as a genuine challenge to it. The second, published seven months later, had a more political tone and, despite its allusive nature, was already harsher and foreshadowed polemical themes that, as we shall see, would spread and characterize the descending phase of the controversy, when its focus was broadened to include the forces supporting the monarchy and, in particular, the "bourgeoisie." The central theme of Panunzio's article[91] was the clear reaffirmation of the revolutionary character of Fascism and the regime it had created and, therefore, of the distinctive nature of the Fascist state as

90 Some ideas and elements of this argument can already be found in an earlier article by the same S. Panunzio, "Party, Regime, State," in *Civiltà fascista*, August 1936, pp. 481 ff. In it, the author had particularly emphasized the concept of the revolutionary party and, consequently, that of a new state in constant formation and transformation. Hence the question of whether the regime comprised only the new forces and institutions it had created "or also, and at the same time, the preexisting institutions and forces—provided, however, that they were renewed, assimilated, and made its own?"; a question that gave political meaning to his entire argument, since it is evident that if the new state embodied by the regime was in a state of continuous evolution and formation—and Panunzio answered this question in the affirmative—then these institutions and forces, and therefore also the monarchy (even if the author did not name it), were subject to the process of revolutionary evolution.

to proceed constantly through "successive and continuous developments" involving all institutions. Within this discourse, the monarchy and the army were placed in an apparently special and privileged position, on the grounds that they "since 1915" "have belonged to Fascism and are institutions of Fascism." In reality, however, the premise for this special position of the monarchy was historically traced back to Mussolini's speech in Udine on September 20, 1922; thus, upon closer reading, the article ultimately took on—as has been noted—the character of a warning to the monarchy, given that —as will be recalled92 —in Udine, Mussolini had indeed set aside what remained of his previous "republican leanings," but he had done so while also asserting 1) that institutions and political forms "cannot be approved or disapproved in the context of eternity" but only within their concrete historical context; 2) that the monarchy had no interest in opposing the Fascist revolution; 3) that if fascism had been republican, it was so because it had seen "a monarch who was not sufficiently a monarch"—in other words, not sufficiently fascist. All of these arguments, as can be seen, were non-committal and reversible depending on the historical moment and the monarchy's stance. And this, written in Mussolini's magazine at a time when the "Duce" was contemplating taking a stand against the monarchy and was likely already thinking of preparing a sort of "cahier" of his "doléances" regarding it,93 certainly could not have been merely coincidental. As for the second article, by Edgardo Sulis,94 it was apparently directed entirely against the bourgeoisie and its self-serving constitutionalism; in reality, however, even in this piece the conclusions—not explicitly drawn by the author but easily deducible by the reader—ultimately implicated the monarchy in full, both as an expression—according to the author —of a pseudo-aristocracy now superseded by the "true aristocracy" of "fitness for command" and representative of that constitutionalism behind which the bourgeoisie entrenched itself to exercise its "seriousness" between the people and their leadership, thereby impeding the people's own advance—and as a barrier, an obstacle to what Sulis defined as the goal of fascism: "single

command”95.

95 Sulis’s relative obscurity should not lead one to consider his stance insignificant. Aside from the fact that Mussolini often made use of figures of secondary importance to initiate certain lines of discourse and gauge the reactions they provoked (so that he could, if necessary, more easily drop them or even deny them), in the case at hand, it should be noted that the issue of “unity of command” and the “Leader” in the new fascist state would shortly thereafter be extensively addressed by a well-known and authoritative fascist jurist such as C. Costamagna in the concluding pages of his *Storia e dottrina del fascismo* (op. cit.), pp. 414 ff., and in particular pp. 418 ff.

Having concluded this lengthy digression on the events surrounding the first promotion to marshal and the context in which they took place, let us try to grasp their significance in relation to Mussolini’s intentions.

For Ciano, the outcome of the operation was to be considered essentially positive—and, as we have seen, to such an extent that he believed that, at the first opportunity, they could “go further.” Starace, for his part, regarded it as a genuine success and would have liked to proceed even further immediately. Mussolini, however, must have been less optimistic, despite his self-confidence. In *Storia di un anno*, after recounting the harsh words the king had directed at Santi Romano on April 4, he wrote: “From that moment on, Victor Emmanuel vowed to himself to take revenge. It was now a matter of waiting for the right moment.”96 These words are heavily influenced by the particular moment in which they were written and contain a fair amount of exaggeration. That said, it must also be noted that, knowing the king much better than Ciano and Starace and having met him face-to-face twice during the events surrounding the first marshalate, Mussolini certainly had a clearer understanding than the king’s son-in-law and the party secretary of the reactions Vittorio Emanuele had to those events and of the risks that new initiatives of that kind would entail. Hence his less optimistic assessment and his conviction that it was more prudent, for the time being, not to go any further down the path of new power grabs explicitly directed against the monarchy, but instead to take the indirect route of a broad campaign aimed at preparing the ground in the country so that, at the opportune moment, the operation against the monarchy could be promptly brought to a successful conclusion. It is in this light that we must view the lack of support for certain more or less individual initiatives by old, hardline fascists which, if carried out, would have provoked new clashes with the monarchy (a typical example in this regard is the proposal that Perrone Compagni suddenly made on December 12, 1938, in the Senate calling for the Senate to “expel” Carlo Sforza97 from its ranks), as well as the abandonment of plans (which were much discussed between the end of 1936 and the end of 1938 and which were linked to the constitutional reform proposals studied between the end of 1929 and 1934) to establish a Grand Chancellery. This was a solution that many Fascists viewed favorably, not only for reasons of principle and practicality, but also because it would have made it possible both to begin elevating Mussolini to that sort of pantheon—which it was hoped would distance him from the direct exercise of power—and to shed some light (based on who would be chosen to hold the office of prime minister) on who would be the “Duce’s” successor.98

The objectives of this preparatory action aimed at resolving the issue of the monarchy—which ultimately came to shape Italian life to a large extent for about a year and a half (roughly until the outbreak of World War II, which led to its partial attenuation but not its end)—were essentially three: to accentuate the totalitarian nature of the regime; to stir the populist spirit of Fascism, so as to give it new momentum and renewed confidence in the “Duce’s” determination to finally undertake that “social march,” that “reaching out to the people” so often announced and promised yet always sacrificed for other “goals”; to denounce and psychologically and morally isolate them—either to force them, to

avoid the worst, to “fall back into line,” or to be able to shift the hostility of the “true fascists” onto them, making them, along with the monarchy, responsible for the regime’s failure to achieve a “social turnaround” - those more strictly bourgeois sectors (industrial and intellectual) of the country that identified their position as “supporters” with that of the monarchy or that, increasingly at odds with Mussolini’s most recent political directives, might be led to view the monarchy with renewed interest, as an alternative within the system that should not be undermined but, on the contrary, should be promoted.”

To properly understand and assess Mussolini’s attitude, it is necessary—before delving into the merits of this action—to make one point very clear: a point that is generally overlooked all too often, with the result that it becomes difficult to grasp the complexity and, in its own way, the coherence of this entire action. Although it took shape and developed as a consequence of and in response to the new phase in the relationship between the monarchy and Fascism, this action—while not lacking in misleading and demagogic aspects—cannot in any way be considered a merely contingent and instrumentally tactical initiative. On the contrary, ideologically and psychologically, it was rooted in convictions and states of mind (some long-standing and deeply ingrained, others more recent) that were very much alive in Mussolini and which he—in his distrust, which at times bordered on contempt, toward Italians and in his unconscious desire to hold them responsible for the regime’s failures in the education of young people and, more generally, in the effective mass fascistization of the country) felt, the more time passed, the more urgent and necessary it was for these convictions to be translated into concrete initiatives by the regime. Thus, for him, it held a value and significance that went far beyond the immediate political objective that prompted its launch and was directly linked to what we have defined as his “moral idea” 100: it was the opportunity to begin setting in motion the mechanism of that “moral reform of the Italians,” which now appeared to him more and more as the great goal toward which to strive by all means and with the regime’s most totalitarian commitment possible—the necessary prerequisite for Italy to fulfill its “civil mission” and its “imperial destiny.” Hence, on the one hand, the wide range of initiatives through which the campaign unfolded (or upon which it had varying degrees of impact) and, on the other hand, its very particular character: “moral” rather than immediately political, “educational” rather than immediately repressive. By this—let this be clear—we do not mean to suggest that it lacked a whole series of political developments and repressive consequences; on the contrary, these existed and were serious. Rather, we wish to draw attention to the specific characteristics that—given the broader objectives Mussolini sought to achieve through it—this action imparted to what the regime itself was keen to define as its most strictly totalitarian phase.

98 The *Informazioni Cremonesi* is rich in evidence in this regard, both in relation to the various sessions of the Grand Council (which were expected to pass the constitutional reform) and to other events that, from time to time, were thought to have at least provided an opportunity to test the reform; for example, at the end of 1936, when there was talk of an imminent visit by the king and Mussolini to Ethiopia, a persistent rumor circulated that the occasion would be used to appoint G. Ciano as acting prime minister. In addition to Ciano, other names mentioned during these years for the premiership were those of Starace and, at the end of 1939, Balbo.

A careful examination of these characteristics allows us to realize how much the historian of Fascism—and in particular of the period we are examining—must not be misled by the extensive use that Fascism made of the term “totalitarian” during this period, nor must he be led to confuse the image evoked by this totalitarian self-representation of Fascism with the reality of true totalitarian regimes. The “totalitarian turn” implemented in Italy at the end of the 1930s had, in fact—as has already been noted—little in common with that reality.

In terms of actual physical coercion, it involved nothing comparable to the use of mass terror characteristic of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. A few figures suffice to demonstrate this. In 1938 and 1939, the Special Court handed down 310 and 365 convictions, respectively, totaling 1,642 years and 6 months of imprisonment in 1938 and 1,988 years and 9 months in 1939. The annual number of convictions was higher than that recorded in the previous six years; however, it was much lower than in 1928 (636) and 1931 (519). Although higher than the annual average for the period 1927–39 (276.6 convictions and 1,484.9 years of imprisonment imposed)101, these figures certainly do not indicate a particular intensification of repression, but merely attest to the emergence after 1937 (many sentences handed down in 1938 concerned anti-fascists arrested the previous year), largely in connection with events in Spain, of a certain resurgence of anti-fascist sentiment102. The same applies to police confinement orders. These, too, show a certain increase,[103] which can be explained not only by the repercussions of the Spanish Civil War but also by growing economic hardship and dissatisfaction with the regime's policies—and certainly not by an increased desire for repression. Significant in this regard is the high number of clemency measures adopted (as in the previous year) in 1938 outside the traditional contexts for such measures.[104]

101 From 1927 through 1939, the Special Court handed down 3,596 convictions (totaling 19,309 years of imprisonment), broken down as follows:

1927	219	1934	259
1928	636	1935	232
1929	159	1936	254
1930	199	1937	172
1931	519	1938	310
1932	213	1939	365
1933	59		

From January 1, 1940, to July 25, 1943, the Special Court handed down over 1,000 convictions (1940: 215; 1941: 276; 1942: 368; 1943: 141). However, these figures are less reliable than those for the previous period, since they do not include apparently non-political convictions handed down as a result of the state of war (including for food rationing offenses). See A. Dal Pont, A. Leonetti, P. Maiello, and L. Zocchi, *Aula IV: All the Trials of the Fascist Special Court*, Rome 1961.

102 At the same time, the share of police service expenses in the state budget decreased significantly. From 1923–24 to 1926–27, it had been 7.46 percent; from 1927–28 to 1935–36, 6.08 percent; and from 1936–37 to 1939–40, 4.6 percent.

105 As of July 25, 1943, the provincial internment commissions had issued 15,470 internment orders. At the time of the fall of fascism, there were 1,882 internees; 13,411 had been released for various reasons (definitive release, conditional release, commutation to a warning or reprimand, revocation), and 177 had died. According to official data (ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Political Internment, p. 22, section "Tables on the Movement of Internees"), the number of internees was:

as of December 31, 1936	1,553	(of whom 58 were fugitives)
as of December 31, 1937	1,813	(of whom 64 were fugitives)

as of December 31, 1938	1,728	(of whom 71 were fugitives)
as of December 31, 1939	2,392	(of whom 68 were fugitives)
as of December 31, 1940	2,504	(of whom 69 were fugitives)
as of December 31, 1941	2,511	(of whom 58 were fugitives)
as of December 31, 1942	1,793	(of whom 56 were fugitives)
as of July 25, 1943	1,882	(of whom 58 were fugitives)

Given the current state of the documentation and the lack of in-depth studies, making a clear distinction between those exiled for political reasons and those exiled for other reasons is even more difficult than it is for those convicted by the Special Court. Even before the outbreak of the war, exile was imposed for various types of offenses, ranging from violations of rent control regulations to pederasty to suspicion of mafia affiliation. The available summary data (the most recent somewhat detailed figures refer to December 31, 1940) distinguish between anarchists, communists, republicans, and socialists, while grouping the other internees up through the end of 1937 under the heading “apolitical” (which included, among others, Slavs, South Tyroleans, and dissident Fascists, as well as those convicted of offenses such as “insults against the head of government”); it was not until the following year that the category “anti-Fascists” was added (only for those currently in confinement).

As of December 31, 1940, a total of 12,310 orders had been issued; of those affected by them, 9,806 had already been released and 97 had died; 2,504 were in exile. According to the PS classifications, the exiles were:

Likewise, there is no indication that during this period the regime consciously sought to further systematically dismantle what remained of the rule of law and to establish a full-fledged police state. Apart from the fact that, with the replacement of Solmi by Grandi in mid-1939, the Ministry of Justice adopted a more “conservative” stance (especially with regard to party interference) and, within certain limits, showed greater respect for the autonomy of the judiciary,105 if a fundamental evolutionary trend can be discerned during this period, it is not so much in that direction as toward an authoritarian state in which certain guarantees of the rule of law, certain aspects of the police state, and—almost as a sort of connecting and balancing element—the personal, paternalistic-demagogic initiative of the “Duce” coexisted. To this day, there has been no study whatsoever on this last aspect of the regime’s political and legal reality. Nevertheless, it seems to us that we can affirm that, beginning in the second half of the 1930s, instances of the “Duce’s” direct and indirect intervention in this field became progressively more numerous and significant (going so far, among other things, as to effectively assume sovereign authority over the matter of amnesties,106) to the point that legal doctrine eventually had to take this into account, even beginning to examine those new “institutions” and procedures that were taking shape precisely as a result of the “Duce’s” initiative. Typical examples in this regard during the 1940s include, above all, certain legal treatises on “appeal to the Duce” as the supreme court of justice. In the concrete legal reality of the time, even if only in its embryonic stages and just beginning to take shape, this evolutionary trend appears, on closer inspection, certainly more characteristic of this phase of the regime than the noisy but essentially fruitless attempts by certain leading sectors of Fascism (the most significant case was probably that of the group gathered around Carlo Costamagna’s journal *Lo Stato*) to impose on legal doctrine and legislation a genuine shift toward totalitarianism along the lines of what had been achieved in Germany.

Anarchists	139
Communists	789

Republicans 18

Socialists 64

Anti-fascists 775

Non-political 719

As for former internees, the same classifications show:

	Permanently released	Conditionally released		Commuted to a warning	Commuted to a reprimand	Revoked	Total
Anarchists	334	64	4	94	3	301	
Communists	2066	382	31	602	49	3130	
Republicans	67	27	3	33	7	137	
Socialists	200	148	17	135	10	510	
Non-partisans	2618	1771	78	836	108	5431	

104 Following the amnesty measures of November 1932 marking the “tenth anniversary” of the “March on Rome” (on which occasion 741 internees were released) and in June 1936—which included two large-scale amnesties, one marking the birth of Prince Vittorio Emanuele (448 released) and another for Christmas (416 released)—as well as two smaller, specific amnesties in favor of Slavs (a total of 44 released) on the occasion of the Italian-Yugoslav rapprochement. In 1938, there were further large-scale clemency measures on Christmas (504 released: 5 anarchists, 36 communists, 1 republican, 21 socialists, 440 apolitical individuals) and the release (in September) of 13 non-Italians (almost certainly from South Tyrol). The most extensive amnesty took place in October 1942, on the occasion of the “second decennial anniversary” (972 released).

105 D. Grandi had been explicitly encouraged by the king to adopt this course of action during the ceremony (at Sant’Anna di Valdieri, on July 10, 1939) marking his swearing-in as Minister of Justice. In his *Diary Fragments*, in the D. Grandi Archive, b. 151, file 199, subfile 3, Grandi recounts the episode as follows: “The King listened to me while automatically scribbling on a sheet of paper. The King said to me: ‘Do you see this scribble? It is meant to be a drawing. The drawing of a seal. The seal of the State entrusted to you as of today. In the ancient French constitutions, the Minister of the Seal was called ‘the King’s conscience.’”

“The Sovereign suddenly grew serious: ‘You can do a great deal to save and defend the seal—that is, the Constitution, the Statute. The Duce (this was the first time I heard the King refer to Mussolini by the word “Duce”) believes he has destroyed our Constitution, which he regards as an old toy no longer of any use. That is not true. The Constitution is eroded, but its pillars remain intact. You must think of nothing else but saving and defending these pillars. You will take the trouble to personally review all the laws and decrees that will be brought to you for the Keeper of the Seals’ countersignature...” I venture to interrupt His Majesty: “But they will reach my desk after Your Majesty and the Head of Government have already signed them…” The King retorts: “It doesn’t matter. As far as I’m concerned, it’s of no consequence. And as for the Duce—here the Sovereign flashes an imperceptible smile—in matters of law, he has a palate as thick-skinned as my camels at San Rossore, which chew prickly pears without feeling the thorns…” The King’s face grows grave: “Europe is facing grave days. Trust your King, just as I trust you, whom I consider not only a loyal servant of Italy, but also devoted to the Dynasty and to my House...”»

And there is even less evidence of any action aimed at establishing effective totalitarian control of the state by the party. Despite all the talk about its role and its decisive importance within the regime, the PNF remained strictly subordinate to the state even during this period.

The entire area of clemency measures was very close to Mussolini's heart; he saw it as a particularly suitable tool for enhancing his image as a just leader—severe yet also merciful. A small episode is quite significant in this regard. In the early 1940s, during discussions about possible amendments to the penal code, Grandi proposed to Mussolini the abolition of the death penalty for common crimes, citing, among other things, the argument that, in any case, he generally commuted most death sentences. Mussolini rejected the proposal on the grounds that abolishing the death penalty would deprive him of the very opportunity to carry out these acts of clemency...

There were many things on which Mussolini could change his mind or be influenced, but certainly not regarding the role of the party and its relationship with the state. As long as he was at the height of his power and could benefit to some extent from the support of G. Ciano, Starace made some attempts (in reality, quite cautious and indirect) to alter the terms of that relationship to the party's advantage, but the results were practically nil, and it was probably also as a result of these attempts that, after Starace was ousted, certain political and cultural responsibilities deemed most sensitive—and likely to lead to interference between the state and the party—were stripped from the PNF (and transferred, as appropriate, to the Ministries of National Education, Popular Culture, and Justice). In this regard as well—if anything—attention should be drawn to the emergence in Mussolini during this period of a tendency toward a new style of exercising power that had nothing to do with totalitarianism and which —even though the "Duce" failed to carry it through to its extreme consequences—significantly diminished the party's already limited influence over the direction of the state.

In January 1941, in the midst of the war, Mussolini decided to call up numerous party leaders and several ministers—including Ciano, Grandi, Bottai, and Ricci—and send them to the front. The decision was interpreted in various ways. To most, it was nothing more than a demagogic act: to demonstrate to the nation at war that the Fascist leaders were not draft dodgers, but were facing the risks of war like any other Italian. Some, such as Bottai, saw something more behind it: according to Ciano,08, almost "a veritable coup d'état by the Duce to free himself from Fascism and rely on other political currents"; according to what he wrote in his diary,[109] a sort of polemical "response" to "those in the country who believe that the dictatorial concentration of power is the primary cause of today's ills" and, at the same time, a way of reaffirming his own dictatorship even in the face of the regime's leadership. As with many of Mussolini's decisions, there were likely multiple motivations behind this one as well, and it cannot be ruled out that some of the interpretations mentioned above had a basis in fact. This does not mean, however, that there were no others. Both Ciano and Bottai, in their diaries, report two statements by Mussolini that either went unnoticed or were considered unimportant witticisms. According to Ciano,[110] Mussolini justified his decision with the desire to conduct "an interesting experiment in governance" by "working directly with the bureaucracy." According to Bottai,[111] the "Duce" is said to have remarked: "I will show the Italians how to govern a country with only directors-general!" In our view, these two statements should not be taken as witticisms but, on the contrary, as an indication that Mussolini's intention was taking shape: to give concrete form to an idea he had been mulling over for some time and which, at that moment, he must have thought he could—if not fully implement, then at least begin to experiment with—by taking advantage of the particular circumstances afforded by the state of war, without revealing too much of his true intentions for the

time being.

When he came to power, Mussolini did not—unlike many socialists or former socialists—have precise ideas about what public bureaucracy truly was or about its role in a modern state. He shared many of the most widespread prejudices and criticisms regarding it, primarily those that portrayed it as not only bloated but also "backward" and a source of obstacles to the activities of citizens "who have the ability and willingness to work" 112, but, above all, he regarded it—as he stated on October 27, 1923, speaking to the Lombard Association of Journalists113—as an "enormous, mysterious, powerful, inexplicable thing." Nevertheless, partly because Parliament had granted the government the powers to reform the state's civil administration as early as 1921—and he wanted to seize the opportunity to demonstrate that Fascism, having just come to power, was capable of resolving such a long-standing and deeply felt issue for the country— partly because Finance Minister De Stefani was pressing for this —he believed that through bureaucratic reform he could streamline the public administration and thereby achieve significant savings toward balancing the budget—and partly so as not to disappoint the expectations of large sectors of the National Fascist Party (PNF), who considered the bureaucracy largely hostile to fascism and, and therefore in need of being brought under control and purged of its most treacherous elements." 4. From the very first days of his government, Mussolini had been deeply committed to bureaucratic reorganization. A series of legislative measures adopted during 1923—within the framework of the powers granted to the government two years earlier—had reformed the system based on largely innovative and authoritarian criteria

111 G. Bottai, *Diario*, f. 1070, as well as (slightly different) id., *Ventanni e un giorno*, op. cit., p. 201. Mussolini expressed himself in almost the same terms to another minister he had brought in, G. Gorla, *Diari*—see *L'Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale*, op. cit., p. 130.

114 It was perhaps to reassure the bureaucracy and demonstrate that he did not share the accusations leveled against it by the Fascist side that, during this period, Mussolini lavished public praise upon it. See ibid., XX, pp. 83 ff., 147 ff., and 231 ff.

(and had led to a significant reduction in personnel, especially temporary staff 115), which, moreover, had corresponded more to the political and technical expectations of the "supporters" and moderate Fascists than to those of intransigent Fascism (it was no coincidence that the true "father" of the reform had been A. De Stefani)116. So much so that numerous critical voices were soon raised from various quarters of the PNF, demanding new measures that would go beyond the "insignificant" technical and staffing adjustments (still considered excessive), take into account the proposals drawn up by the expert group on public administration, and lead to an effective "Fascistization" of the bureaucracy. These voices[117] had grown particularly loud during the months of the Matteotti crisis, when it had seemed that vast sectors of the bureaucracy (which the previous year—regardless of what the hardliners might say —had viewed fascism favorably[118] and, in general, had not opposed the reform) were shifting toward the constitutional opposition parties. Mussolini, however, had taken no account of this whatsoever and had, on the contrary, sought to emphasize that he considered the reform a complete success and well-suited to the needs of the time and, above all, that he regarded the bureaucracy as aligned with the government. Particularly significant is what he said on this subject in Milan on October 4, 1924:

There are reforms that I would call fundamental, foremost among which is that of the bureaucracy.

With this reform—of which I am extremely proud—we have not only granted legal status to the 504,000 civil servants of the Italian state, but we have also placed them all within a hierarchical structure. Everyone knows exactly where they start and where they end up. It was a Herculean task, but

we succeeded; and today the entire bureaucracy is organized and functioning. The bureaucracy is running smoothly. Of course, many governments had led it down a somewhat rocky path. However, ultimately, given the constant turnover of governments, the only element of stability was the bureaucracy. If it weren't for the bureaucracy, we would have found ourselves in utter chaos, because—regardless of all philosophies and political doctrines—the governance of the state also consists of a series of more or less marginalized administrative practices. Amid the perpetual, rotating instability of governments, it was the bureaucracy that embodied the continuity of the nation's entire administrative—and, therefore, political—life... Today, the bureaucracy is aware of its duties. I believe that certain of its material and moral needs still require attention. The ideal can be summed up in this formula: a small number of well-paid civil servants who can lead a dignified and upright life.

118 According to C. A. Jemolo, "The Organization of the Bureaucracy in Decree No. 2393 of November 1923," in *Rivista di diritto pubblico*, 1924, p. 22, with Mussolini's rise to power, "the class of civil servants" had opened "its heart to greater hopes."

L. F. T. Mussolini, XXI, p. 91. See also, ibid., pp. 280 ff., the statements made in the Chamber of Deputies on April 4, 1925.

Given the extremely serious political difficulties of the moment, in uttering these words Mussolini had certainly been motivated (as he would be three months later, when, unbeknownst to the Minister of Finance himself, he decided to increase civil servants' salaries[120]) above all by the need to reassure the bureaucracy, win back its support, and counter its growing detachment from the government and from fascism. It is, however, difficult not to detect in them as well the echo, the foreshadowing of something less contingent and immediately political. In the clear reaffirmation of the full validity—not only and not so much technical121, but above all political ("today the bureaucracy is aware of its duties")—of the reform that had come into effect the previous year and, therefore, of the particular ethical, legal, and political relationship it had established between the state and its employees (and which, not coincidentally, Mussolini would reiterate ten years later, defining it as a "fundamental" law that he had not wanted to see altered in any way[122]), in the adoption of the principle of "few, well-paid civil servants" as a rule of conduct for the government and in the defense of the bureaucracy as the "continuity of the nation's entire administrative—and, therefore, political—life," one can already discern the first manifestation of that particular understanding of the regime-bureaucracy relationship that would, in the following years, characterize Mussolini's policy toward public administration and that, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, would ultimately lead the "Duce" to consider the possibility of implementing a model of power management markedly different from that advocated by Fascism and which had nothing in common with totalitarian models.

In contrast to those sectors of fascism—which we have already mentioned—that, albeit for different reasons (for some

121 A committee chaired by A. De Stefani drafted in 1928–29 a number of "proposals for the improvement of working methods and oversight of state administrations." Mussolini, however, chose not to act on them. See A. De Stefani, *Una riforma al rogo*, op. cit.; R. Spaventa, *Burocrazia, ordinamenti amministrativi e fascismo*, Milan 1928 (on the background of the reality the proposals were intended to address); *Associazione Generale Fascista del Pubblico Impiego*, Rome 1931, pp. 34 ff. (on some reactions to them).

(some of a political-functional nature and, in their own way, liberal; others of an exclusively political-

partisan nature, centered on power), aimed at an effective fascistization of the bureaucracy that would stop at nothing and would therefore also proceed with a massive purge and the replacement of those purged with “reliable” Fascists and a redistribution of leadership roles completely detached from established positions and seniority. Even after overcoming the Matteotti crisis—satisfied with having incorporated the bureaucracy into the dual mechanism of the 1923 reform and the regime—Mussolini had never contemplated an effective, total, coercive,123 and rapid fascistization of the bureaucracy. Such an operation, in fact, would not only have dramatically altered the balance of the compromise upon which the regime was settling and developing (and Mussolini could not afford such a show of force), but—even if it had been conceivable—it would have had two consequences for him that were equally far from his intentions: it would have led to a remarkable revitalization and reevaluation of the National Fascist Party (PNF) and to an equally remarkable devaluation of the public administration, given that “true” fascism was not—save for quantitatively insignificant cases—capable of producing a bureaucracy that could meet the needs and technical expertise of the one it was supposed to replace. Hence his decision to focus, even with regard to the fascistization of the bureaucracy, on a gradual approach—that is, on the progressive (and non-traumatic) integration of new generations of fascists,124 limiting himself for the time being, on the one hand, to placing within the public administration (and especially in certain key ministries, such as the Interior and Foreign Affairs) a certain number of fascists of proven loyalty or who needed to be “placed” or removed from their previous local party posts,[125] and, on the other hand, to encourage the bureaucracy’s loyalty to the regime by granting it certain material and moral benefits.[26] Nor

123 There were two ad hoc coercive measures. Law No. 2300 of December 24, 1925, provided (until December 31, 1926) that the grounds for dismissal from service already provided for by the 1923 reform be expanded to include “actions taken on or off duty” that led to the belief that the employee did not provide “full assurance of faithful fulfillment of his duties” or placed himself “in a position incompatible with the government’s general political directives.” See, on this subject, the report and the speeches with which A. Rocco presented it to Parliament in A. Rocco, *Scritti e discorsi politici*, vol. III, Milan 1938, pp. 821 ff. Consolidated Law No. 1848 of November 6, 1926, on public security, in turn provided for the dismissal or removal from rank or position—or, in any case, the termination of employment—of personnel of the State or public entities who belonged to secret associations.

124 From 1932 to 1940, various measures were adopted that made membership in the National Fascist Party (PNF) a necessary requirement for participation in public competitive examinations, facilitated the career advancement of party members, and ensured benefits for members of the Squadristi. For further details, see M. Rusciano, *Public Employment in Italy*, op. cit., pp. 90 ff.

126 Mussolini spoke publicly on several occasions about the trend in government salaries; see in particular Mussolini, XXIV, pp. 314 ff. (in the Senate on December 18, 1930) and XXVI, pp. 238 ff. (in the Chamber of Deputies on May 26, 1934). On those occasions, and again on October 6, 1934 (ibid., XXVI, p. 356), it is believed that this choice was, for the “Duce,” of the sort that makes a virtue of necessity. Given his radical pessimism regarding human nature and, consequently, his instinctive adherence to theories such as those of R. Michels (whom he, moreover, knew well and held in high regard) regarding the importance of bureaucracy as the most reliable pillar of any government, but also regarding its underlying opportunism—comparable to that of an army of mercenaries— “always ready —whether out of class selfishness, personal gain, or especially for fear of losing their jobs—to take up the defense of the state, whatever the issue at hand, since it provides them with their livelihood… except, of course, to defect lock, stock, and barrel, in the event of a successful revolution, to the camp of those who lead the new state,”[27], we believe, on the contrary, that it must have appeared to him in every respect to be the best, as well as the safest, especially after the Matteotti crisis had passed and it

became increasingly clear that if any defection were to occur, it would certainly not be toward the opposition's camp, but toward the Fascist one.

A question—marginal but not negligible—that arises for the historian at this point is why—if this was his position—Mussolini sought for a long time to curb the quantitative expansion of the state bureaucracy,[128] when authors he held in high regard (for example, he also addressed the issue of their numbers, denying that they were excessive but declaring himself opposed to an overly sharp increase)

According to official iSTAT data, *Summary of Italian Historical Statistics 1861–1955*, Rome 1958, pp. 204 ff., the trend in civil servants' salaries under Fascism was as follows:

	1913	1918	1921	1925	1930	1934	1939	1942
Executive Career								
General Manager				IO OOO		11 675	23 33i	35 926
division director				7,000	8,400	14,847	23,726	26,910
Section Director				6,000	7,308	14,097	21 IOI	22,638
First-Class Advisor				5,000	6,217	13,247	18,376	21 OH
Second-Class Advisor				3,350	4,713	8,681	13,326	15,271
Executive Career								
Chief Archivist				4,350	5,830	12,081	15,851	16,513
applied	2,350	3,375	8,161	9,001	8,99i	8,453	io 088	15,024
Assistant		1,850	2,938	7 Jói	7 5Oi	7,234	7,146	8,613
Auxiliary Career								
Clerk	2,250	3,447	8,656	IO 884	io 702	9,874	11,833	16,309
Clerk	1,650	2,682	6,656	7,701	7,235	7,038	8,53i	12,554
Attendant		1,450	2,427	6,256	6,486	5,857	5,782	6,953

	1942	1943
Executive Career		
General Manager	44 145	38 649
division director	23,350	27,373
Section Director	19,788	23,362
First-Class Advisor	19,152	22,941
Second-Class Advisor	14,172	16,936
Executive Career		
Chief Archivist	14,836	17,736
applied	8,453	io 088
Assistant	7,146	8,613
Auxiliary Career		
Clerk	9,874	11,833
Clerk	7,038	8,53i
Attendant	5,782	6,953

	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950
Executive Career								
General Manager	45 307	55 174						
division director	35,154							
Section Director	30,644							
First-Class Advisor	28,774							
Second-Class Advisor	22,064							
Executive Career								
Chief Archivist	23,604							
applied								
Assistant	13,040							
Auxiliary Career								
Clerk	16,309							
Clerk	12,554							
Attendant	io 497							

For preliminary information on the additional benefits enjoyed by civil servants, see Associazione Generale Fascista del Pubblico Impiego, op. cit.

127 The quotation is taken from a 1931 memorandum (reproduced in R. Michels, *Studies on Democracy and Authority*, Florence 1933, pp. 93 ff. and esp. 112); however, the concepts expressed therein had already been articulated several times by Michels in earlier writings dating back to the first two decades of the century.

R. Michels) regarded this development as practically unstoppable and considered the frustration of the aspiration to join the ranks of the bureaucracy to be one of the main reasons for the hostility toward the state among the intellectual middle classes in countries, such as Italy, where industry and commerce were unable to absorb them adequately or offer them better opportunities. During the Fascist period, there would be a substantial increase in public employment, due above all to "an expansion from above of the institutions of control—in keeping with the very logic of the dictatorship—and of clientelist networks." However, this assessment has been shown to be incorrect by S. Cassese (see especially *Questione amministrativa e questione meridionale. Dimensioni e reclutamento della burocrazia dall'unità ad oggi*, Milan 1977, pp. 3, 38 ff., 52 ff., and passim), who is currently the foremost scholar on the subject.

From 1923 to 1931, the number of civil servants remained virtually unchanged, with just under 10 percent of positions filled through open competition. From 1931 to 1935, there was a largely fictitious increase, due to the inclusion in the government payroll of personnel from the Austro-Hungarian

government in the “new provinces” and the transfer to government employment of school superintendents, elementary school teachers, and instructors at vocational training schools. A genuine increase (more pronounced for non-tenured staff) occurred during the years of World War II. A truly meaningful comparison of quantitative data must distinguish the total number of state employees into at least three groups: civil servants, teachers, and military personnel (during peacetime, of course) and be based primarily on data pertaining to the first group. In addition to the statistical sources listed at the bottom of the table below, see ACS, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Cabinet, 1927, file 1-1-4/104; 1940–43, file no. 1-3-1/48099; as well as, from July 1, 1923, to January 1, 1935, the semiannual supplements to the *Gazzetta Ufficiale*:

1918	1921	1925	1930	1934	1939	1942
Civil Service Ministries						
Permanent staff	—	—	61,705	62,490	64,409	66,930	72,394
Non-permanent staff	—	—	13,883	11,657	15,069	16,308	32,267
Teachers						
Tenured	—	—	11,216	12,303	100 209“	114,369	127,113
Non-tenured	—	—	2,719	1,647	18,630	24,409	29,161
military personnel	—	-	130,338 b	177 222c	173,306	223,167	-
workers							
permanent employees			29,462	3,324	3,428	78,976	116,025
non-permanent staff	—	-	36,846	33,804	37,763		
total	162,759	228,387	306,189	302,447	4M 493,324	369,397	162
Total excluding military	162,759	228,387	133,831	125,225	239,189	301,202	397,162	

Railways - Post and Telecommunications - Monopolies - State Security - and other civil agencies

Permanent staff	—	-	-	-	—	176723	I7i 694
Non-permanent staff	—	—	—		—	19 403	67 734
Military personnel	—	—	-	—	—	7,172	8,844
Total workers	—	-	-	-	—	32,733	34,637
Permanent staff	123,3i3	231,161	192,282	216,652	211,629	176,723	171,694
non-tenured	42,296	13,372	42,474	14,654	19,403	67,734	
total excluding military personnel	167,609	231,161	205,854	239,126	226,283	228,881	274,085	

As of January 1, 1932, educational directors, elementary school teachers, and teachers at vocational schools became the responsibility of the State.

b Including the police forces and the Guardia di Finanza.

c Including the police forces, the Guardia di Finanza, and the MVSN.

Sources: ISTAT Yearbooks 1919–36; Ministry of the Treasury—General Accounting Office of the State, Numerical Status of Civilian and Military Personnel and Related Expenses as of July 1, 1949, Rome 1951.

Estimates129. In our view, the answer to this question must be sought at least on three different levels.

On an economic level, in the need to avoid placing an excessive burden on the state budget with new recurring expenses. On a technical-political level, in the concern not to overburden the public administration and not to diminish its efficiency by introducing unsuitable personnel from the party (that is, not to provoke their discontent by favoring individuals who were less “deserving” and “reliable” over them). Finally, on a psychological-cultural level, in the fact that Mussolini himself was largely influenced by the controversy surrounding the bureaucratic bloat that characterized Italian culture at the time and virtually all social circles (including those who, at the same time, aspired more than anyone else to a “secure position” in the public administration), so that, having to weigh the pros and cons of the matter, he ended up entrenching himself in a middle ground: rejecting both the proposals for further downsizing of the public administration coming from men like De Stefani and the political considerations suggesting he expand its ranks and thus provide an outlet for the intellectual petty bourgeoisie, especially that of the South.[130] This was all the more true because, by doing so, he could justify his choice on the basis of his “sense of the state” and his role as the supreme coordinator and guardian of all interests,131 while the function of providing an outlet could be transferred from the state to the then-expanding parastatal sector.132 This explains why, as long as it was possible—that is, until the years of World War II, which saw a significant increase in the number of civil servants,133—the dominant trend was toward a limited expansion of the state bureaucracy, driven primarily by the objective need to broaden its responsibilities,134 balanced, so to speak, by a greater expansion (though still less substantial than is often claimed) of the parastatal sector.135

130 With the Bottai reform, the regime made a significant effort to rationalize the educational system and academic programs based on the needs and opportunities of the labor market, with the aim of directing young people toward productive activities and diverting them as much as possible from public administration. See T. M. Mazzatosta, *The Fascist Regime Between Education and Propaganda (1935–1943)*, Bologna 1978, pp. 120 ff.

132 Precise figures on the number of parastatal employees are lacking. Based on available data (ACS, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Cabinet, 1940–1943, file 6-2/9690), the number can be estimated at approximately 35,000 in 1932 and 48,000–50,000 in 1939. For a list of parastatal and similar entities, see the implementing regulation of July 28, 1939, No. 1436, concerning the reorganization of the National Fascist Social Security and Welfare Agency for Employees of Parastatal and Similar Entities, in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, November 7, 1940, pp. 4236 ff.

133 On the eve of Italy’s entry into the war, however, there were many who considered the number of employees in the various bureaucracies—state, union, corporate, party, etc.—not only excessive but such as to constitute a very serious obstacle to social and, in particular, economic life. See, on this last point, E. Conti, *From the Notebook of a Bourgeois*, Milan 1946, pp. 681 ff.

134 Even a newly established and typically Fascist ministry such as the Ministry of Corporations kept the number of its employees within reasonable limits during its early years.

As we have already noted,136 the result of this policy was a largely superficial “fascistization”: the regime had, in fact, found itself with a state bureaucracy that was largely composed (even at the highest managerial levels) of men who had been trained and had begun their careers under the old liberal-democratic state and who, despite having joined the new regime,137 remained in many respects still tied—out of conviction, habit, calculation, and moral and practical self-defense—to some of its fundamental values. For many Fascists—even those who were not extremists and who were aware of the impossibility of changing this situation in the short term—this situation weighed heavily on them.

In particular, they had accused the old bureaucrats of failing to understand the “spirit of fascism,” of stubbornly defending anachronistic and “out-of-step” positions, and of insisting on making those positions prevail over those of their younger fascist colleagues, in the name of an experience that, in reality, was nothing more than “the perfect knowledge and exploitation of all the mental and spiritual distortions that once contributed to maintaining the exercise of power”138. And, as the years passed, it became even more apparent that, while there was so much talk of the party’s “irreplaceable” role and the “revolutionary” novelty represented by the corporations (whose aim was to be the “self-administration of the economy”), it was becoming increasingly evident that, in reality, what truly mattered was the traditional state bureaucracy, while the others—the corporatist, trade union, and party bureaucracies—ended up spinning their wheels in this situation, creating obstacles, and burdening the national budget; and that, despite this, Mussolini never missed an opportunity to praise it, reaffirm his confidence in it, and extol its role.[139] A typical reflection of this discontent is a brief but significant passage from a 1934 article in *Il secolo fascista*[140]:

In 1932, five and a half years after its creation, it had 715 permanent employees, 187 non-permanent employees, and 754 permanent and non-permanent workers. By 1935, these numbers had risen to 939, 219, and 689, respectively.

135 Especially in the second half of the 1930s, the parastatal sector was often used to “settle” old fascists and former party leaders or to offer financial compensation to those whom the regime wished to eliminate politically. This practice even gave rise to various jokes, including one that claimed the acronym for the Italian General Petroleum Company (AGIP) stood for “Company of Retired Party Leaders.” See M. Rivoire, *Vita e morte del fascismo* (The Life and Death of Fascism), Milan 1947, p. 103.

137 An idea of the process of “fascistization” of the bureaucracy can be gleaned—in the absence of more precise data—from the rate of membership in the General Fascist Association of Public Employees: 70,000 in 1926, 80,000 in 1927, 100,000 in 1928, for a total of approximately 230,000. In 1929, the integration of the bureaucracy became “almost totalitarian.” See General Fascist Association of Public Employees, op. cit., p. 3.

If it is a fundamental tenet of the Fascist revolution that no individual or social function should be carried out outside of—or, worse, against—the State, it is also worth asking to what extent the State must identify with the ministerial bureaucracy, so as not to run the risk of seeing all the functions of national life absorbed by the bureaucracy.

And even more significant is that, a few years later, in 1938, an authoritative representative of the new fascist intransigence, C. Costamagna, felt the need to take a stand against certain “traditionalist” jurists (who, incidentally, were not named—and not by chance) who, in academic circles, sanctioned “the distortion of the Fascist state into an ‘administrative’ or ‘bureaucratic’ state”141.

Once again, however, the discontent, criticisms, and proposals[142] of the fascists had gone unheeded. Over the years, for a variety of reasons—partly objective, related to the reality of the regime, and partly subjective, stemming from Mussolini’s own personality and his conception of the exercise of power—the public administration had, in the eyes of the “Duce,” assumed ever-greater importance. First and foremost, this was due to the failure of hopes that fascism would be able to quickly produce its own ruling class: not only had these hopes been dashed, but Mussolini had been forced to acknowledge that

the regime's ruling class internally reproduced virtually all the old divisions and structures, the old ideological and interest-based conflicts—in short, the flaws—of that

139 See, for example, in Mussolini, XXIV, pp. 12, 119, and 121 ff., as well as in XXVI, pp. 93 ff., the reference to the bureaucracy made on November 14, 1933, during the speech "On the Corporative State": "Our State is an organic, human State that seeks to adhere to the reality of life.

"Bureaucracy itself is not today—and even less so tomorrow—intended to be a barrier between the work of the State and the actual, concrete interests and needs of the Italian people.

"I am absolutely certain that the Italian bureaucracy, which is admirable, just as it has been up to now, will work with the corporations whenever necessary to achieve the most fruitful solution to problems."

142 In 1939, inspired by the creation of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, Bottai also made yet another attempt to raise the issue of an effective bureaucratic reform that would rationalize public administration, put an end to the existence of two bureaucracies—one political and the other administrative—that "strictly" ignored , graft "the new dynamic forces of the Revolution onto the old trunk of the bureaucracy," and extend the corporatist logic to it. See "Critica fascista," "L'amministrazione nel Regime," in *Critica fascista*, January 15, 1939, pp. 82 ff. and id., "Crescendo Burocratico," ibid., July 15, 1939, pp. 282 ff., in which it was even argued that the hoped-for new administrative order could have resulted in a "fourth Charter," following those of labor, race, and education.

pre-fascist era, and that the contribution of fascism's "new men"—save for a few minor exceptions—had not improved the situation and had often worsened it, introducing new sources of conflict and inefficiency. Second, because of Mussolini's personality: increasingly marked by pessimism regarding human nature, by contempt—in particular—for those around him, by distrust and jealousy toward those among them who, for whatever reason, stood out more; and, furthermore, by his centralizing tendencies, his conviction that, in reality, everything positive that was accomplished was due to him—to his "slaving away" all day, every day—and by his growing egocentrism. And, finally, because of the ever-increasing influence that all of this exerted, over time, on Mussolini's conception of the exercise of power. With Parliament—which the 1938 reform of the Chamber of Deputies would even downgrade to a mere "supplementary" body to the government—and the party having been sidelined for years, and the Grand Council also in the process of being gradually sidelined, Mussolini could consider himself satisfied with regard to fundamental—or, at any rate, the most important—political decisions. Although he had to take into account the complex balances of the regime, these decisions in fact depended increasingly solely on him—on his "intuition," his "foresight," and his political plans. At most, they might be influenced by "technocrats" (preferably "pure" ones, that is, without political appointments or concerns) who, moreover, served only as consultants tasked with studying individual problems (and often individual aspects of a given problem) from a technical standpoint, almost never delving into their political substance—which remained the exclusive purview of the "Duce's" personal assessment, as did the final decision. Highly significant in this regard is the fact that with the establishment, in 1938, of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations—and even more so with an official communiqué issued to explain it—the presentation of bills would in practice be taken away from the ministers and reserved for the "Duce." Thus, S. Panunzio was not mistaken in writing that "in our Regime, ministers are nothing more than technical collaborators of the Head of Government."[143] The situation was less satisfactory with regard to minor decisions—which were more difficult to control directly even for a centralizer like Mussolini—and especially in the phase following the political decision, that of practical implementation. At this point, in fact, political interference and the interplay

of interests and groups became, according to Mussolini, too numerous and too frequent, to the point of distorting the original decisions, slowing and undermining their implementation, and sometimes even covering them up.

To remedy this situation to some extent—at least as far as the decision-making phase was concerned—as early as the late 1920s and early 1930s, a whole series of responsibilities had begun to be centralized within the Office of the Prime Minister, and consideration had been given to creating a Ministry of the Prime Minister's Office with its own legislative bureau responsible for all ministries. As we have seen,[144] however, this plan was abandoned at the time. By 1935, and especially during 1938–40, the plan to establish at least the legislative office was once again given serious consideration, although in the end it did not go beyond the creation of an Office for Studies and Ministerial Measures within the Office of the Prime Minister,[145] which, in fact, brought about virtually no innovation. This was due, on the one hand, to the difficulties posed by the upper echelons of the bureaucracies in the various ministries and, on the other hand, to the war, which made such experiments inadvisable. Although it never materialized, the project is indicative of the general direction in which they wished to move: a path toward maximum centralization, depoliticization, and technocratization of the state apparatus; in other words, conducting politics in such a way that—apart from Mussolini, of course—this would fall as little as possible within the purview of politicians, or—at the very least—conducting politics through administration. From this perspective, it is easy to understand how Mussolini was increasingly inclined to view the state bureaucracy (and, alongside it, in certain sectors, that of some large public agencies) as the true and most reliable "element of stability" for the regime—the "printing press" of his government. A "printing press" that, in addition to carrying out his directives in administrative and managerial terms rather than "political" ones—as the party, the unions, and the corporations tended to do—had the advantage, in his view—in line with the prevailing beliefs of the time—of possessing "competence" and a "sense of the state."

An in-depth examination of the extent to which reality corresponded to this conviction of the "Duce" would lead us to dwell on a whole series of issues, undoubtedly important, but which—in the final analysis—would prove marginal to our specific discussion. We shall therefore limit ourselves to just two considerations. The first concerns the "competence" and "sense of the state" of the bureaucracy during Fascism; the second, the most notable consequences of this Mussolini-era attitude toward public administration. As for the first, it is appropriate to begin with the assessment of the state bureaucracy during the Fascist period and, even more so, the assessment made after the fall of Fascism. This assessment was generally very critical and harsh and can be summarized as follows: during the Fascist years, the bureaucracy was said to have been inefficient, passively submissive to political power, and not infrequently corrupt. Such a drastic judgment is, in our view, to be rejected, as it is largely the result—on the one hand—of the superficial anti-bureaucratic polemic that has characterized nearly a century of Italian culture and still largely characterizes it today; on another hand, of mere political partisanship; and, on yet another hand, of a failure to understand the distinctive features that set the history of administrative apparatuses apart from that of politics, particularly with regard to the timescales of changes affecting these apparatuses, which are longer—or, at least, visible only over longer timeframes—than those of political history.[146] During the Fascist era, the state bureaucracy certainly underwent a process of qualitative (technical and moral) and functional degradation (due to the creation of new public administrations that stripped the ministerial apparatus of a whole range of responsibilities in fields destined to become increasingly important 147). This process, however, was slow overall—so much so that its major effects were felt primarily after the end of Fascism—both because, except in exceptional cases, it did not affect the top leadership or the middle management of "Giolittian" origin and training as much but rather the new personnel who had entered the civil service under Fascism, and because the presence of these personnel became—especially in the state administration proper, though

the same applies to some of the major public institutions of a more technical nature, such as the Bank of Italy, FIMI, and TIRI—quantitatively significant and qualitatively more indiscriminate during the years of World War II, when, moreover, the regime's crisis and the material hardships of the moment served as further incentives to break away from a certain tradition and a certain bureaucratic habitus—which were by no means negative—that, until then, had continued to characterize the behavior of the Italian bureaucracy.[148] Thus, it can be said that from this perspective, Mussolini was not wrong to rely on the bureaucracy: with its traditionalism (which he sought to defend

144 At least until the late 1930s, cases of resistance by the bureaucracy to political interference and pressure—even from the most authoritative sources—were far from rare. A case in point is the refusal (justified by the lack of a suitable position on the staff) by a number of major institutions in early 1933—including the National Workers' Compensation Fund, the National Social Insurance Fund, and the Italian Red Cross, opposed the request from Mussolini's Private Secretariat to find a "consulting or other position" for Dr. Francesco Petacci, the father of Claretta Petacci. See ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Ordinary Correspondence, file no. 14483, "Petacci, Comm. Dr. Francesco."

was also often led to oppose the interference of the party, the trade unions, and the corporative bodies), and his conception of the state as an entity above politics—as long as the regime gave him confidence that it would endure—there is no doubt that it constituted for him the greatest guarantee of the faithful implementation of his directives. Where Mussolini erred, however, was in failing to consider or in underestimating the longer-term consequences of his attitude toward the bureaucracy and, in particular, his tendency to delegate a whole range of powers to it. As Cassese149 rightly wrote, in the 1930s, during an early phase of sectoral administrative planning, a form of planning characterized by the granting of general prescriptive administrative authority to the sectoral administration emerged as the prevailing model. In essence, the governing provision merely grants powers to the competent sectoral administration. This administration plans freely and through acts of general applicability.

The main examples are: agricultural planning, which began with the 1933 provisions on land reclamation; credit planning, starting in 1936; and public expenditure planning, starting in 1939.

This policy certainly had positive aspects, both on a practical level—as it highlighted the best aspect of the bureaucracy, namely its technical expertise—and on a "political" level (in the Mussolini sense), as it significantly reduced the possibility of external political interference. However, it also had significant negative aspects that affected the entire bureaucracy, not just those assigned to sectoral planning bodies. In particular, it allowed the bureaucracy to accumulate a series of technical powers that enabled it to dictate policy in many fields, thereby gradually appropriating genuine political power; and it placed the bureaucracy in increasingly direct contact with economic forces and interests that only partially shared the regime's policies, sought to influence it, and would increasingly diverge from it from the second half of the 1930s onward. Already serious in and of themselves, these negative aspects would become increasingly severe over time. First, by depriving the regime and Mussolini himself of a certain degree of decision-making power and bargaining capacity with the business world, and then, during World War II, by fostering—in tandem with the increasingly unfavorable course of the war and the progressive weakening of the regime—the formation of a sort of common front between the bureaucracy and the business world that would further weaken the regime and the "Duce's" personal position

and contributed significantly to the process that led to the crisis of July 25.[150] To Mussolini, however, these negative aspects must have either gone unnoticed, seemed secondary, or, perhaps, been something he believed could be eliminated over time. Certainly, they did not serve as a brake on his policy of

elevating the public administration relative to the political class. Despite the criticism it provoked within the regime and the PNF (among the hardliners and those who advocated a totalitarian regime modeled on the Nazi one, but also among the moderates who saw it as a dangerous cause of the state's weakening and of rifts within the regime's ruling class, as well as yet another manifestation of the "Duce's" authoritarian and centralizing regression), it did in fact become, in the second half of the 1930s, one of the defining aspects—albeit less obvious at first glance—of this phase of the regime. And, upon closer inspection, rightly so. Without getting ahead of a discussion we will have later, suffice it to say that at its root lay not only Mussolini's political, cultural, and psychological motivations, which we have discussed so far, but the very conception of the totalitarian fascist state—or, if you prefer, the Mussolini-style state. A conception that—if applied consistently—led to an extreme politicization of society but, at the same time, to a substantial depoliticization of the state and, indeed, to its reduction to the level of mere "administration."

In this context, Mussolini's experiment from January to May 1941—to govern directly through the bureaucracy without the intermediation of politicians, which served as the starting point for this digression—loses the air of incomprehensibility and absurdity it otherwise seems to possess and even acquires its own logic, so much so that it is possible to discern some embryonic precursors of it in earlier years, suggesting that the idea had been maturing in Mussolini's mind for some time. If we consider just the criteria that guided the government reshuffle carried out by Mussolini in September 1929 (and, to some extent, again in June 1936)—decentralizing the management of political affairs from himself to his closest collaborators, placing his trust in them and valuing their personalities, their abilities, and their roles—and those that instead guided the experiment of 1941—removing those same collaborators from the management of political affairs, thereby demonstrating that he no longer trusted them and even considered them an obstacle to his policies—the shift in attitude certainly appears radical. However, if one bears in mind that in the meantime Mussolini had formed his judgment not only on the Fascist ruling class but also on the bureaucracy, and if one pays attention to certain facts—such as the particularly telling one regarding the frequency with which, from 1932–33 onward, Mussolini had left unfilled for long periods, and even permanently, a certain number of undersecretary positions that had become vacant or that he himself had vacated during one of the periodic cabinet reshuffles,[151] one must in fact conclude that this was not a radical change in attitude, but rather an evolutionary process that was anything but sudden and, in its own way, formally logical. Thus, if a question arises, it is not about the significance of the experiment, but about the reasons why it remained, precisely, an experiment. In other words, on why Mussolini, once the Greek campaign was over, demobilized the ministers he had recalled to active duty four months earlier, thereby putting an end to the "government of the directors-general." A complete answer to this question would require an explanation of a series of factors related to that particular moment, which cannot be addressed here. Limiting ourselves only to those elements most directly related to the issue at hand, we believe we can nevertheless say that, in addition to sparking a storm of negative reactions within the Fascist leadership,[152] it caused a slowdown in all activities within the ministries left without a minister,[53] to the extent that Mussolini was forced in mid-February to hastily appoint three new undersecretaries (two of whom, not coincidentally, had to resign immediately after their respective ministers returned to their posts), and created no small number of practical and legal difficulties even for the normal conduct of general political affairs (the Council of Ministers met only three times in four months, with the participation of only five members in addition to Mussolini[154]). Faced with these difficulties and inconveniences—which demonstrated the inappropriateness, not to say the impossibility, of leaving the management of the state apparatus solely in the hands of the bureaucracy, especially at such a difficult time for the country and for himself—even Mussolini could not help but realize the need to put an end to the experiment. This was all the more true since the conclusion of the Greek campaign offered him both the pretext to recall to Rome the ministers he had mobilized and a way to save face, giving his

decision the appearance of something natural and already a foregone conclusion. This, however, does not justify the conclusion that he had abandoned his idea or that he did not intend to revive it at a less difficult time, when he would have a more “mature” and dynamic bureaucracy at his disposal.[155] This is all the more true given that even within Fascist circles there were those who did not consider the matter closed. Particularly significant in this regard is the preface, “Confidences and Convictions” (published in 1941 in the *Rivista italiana di scienze economiche*), which Alberto De Stefani wrote for a collection of his political and economic writings. In it, the former Minister of Finance and “father” of the 1923 reform spoke out clearly against any notion of an administrative state—not in the abstract, but by explicitly referring to the reality of the totalitarian state. De Stefani wrote on this subject[156]:

151 In 1932, one position at the Ministry of Finance became vacant; in 1933, two positions became vacant—one at the Ministry of Trade and Industry (until 1937) and one at the Ministry of Public Works; in 1936, one in the Colonies (until 1937), one in the Corporations (until 1939), one in Justice (until 1940), and one in the Press and Propaganda; in 1937, one in Agriculture, one in Finance, and a third in National Education (until 1939); in 1939, three: one for Agriculture, one for Italian Africa, and one for Foreign Affairs. See M. Missori, *Governments, High State Offices, and Prefects of the Kingdom of Italy*, Rome 1973, pp. 148 ff. In June 1937, there was persistent talk in Roman political circles of an imminent abolition of all undersecretariats. See *Informazioni Cremonesi*, June 15, 1937.

152 The member of the Fascist leadership who most clearly (albeit belatedly) expressed his outright dissent to Mussolini regarding the experiment was G. Giuriati. In a letter written to him on July 17, 1943, we read: “The authority of ministers—generally your subordinate commanders—has been discredited in many ways. I could cite many examples, but one will suffice: the fact that during the war in Greece, a group of ministers was allowed to go to the front while retaining their posts. This has conferred upon the directors-general an authority and independence that I do not hesitate to describe as pernicious to the State.” See A. Aquarone, *The Organization of the Totalitarian State*, op. cit., p. 612.

154 The last regular session of the Council of Ministers was held on January 7. At the conclusion of that session, a subsequent meeting was scheduled for February 22, but it did not take place. Instead, the Council of Ministers met on April 10 and 30 and on May 8, with the participation—in addition to Mussolini—of only five ministers: Serena (PNF), Teruzzi (AI), Thaon di Revel (Finance), Tassinari (Agriculture), and Host-Venturi (Communications). Only the last of these meetings was reported, evidently to avoid revealing their blatant irregularity and relying on the fact that, for the last one, it could be assumed the ministers had by then returned from the front. The first meeting that was once again held in accordance with proper procedure, with all ministers present, took place only on June 7, 1941.

While in liberal regimes the rulers of the people were bound to a certain political agnosticism regarding supreme principles, in totalitarian regimes they cannot avoid fulfilling an active moral function conferred upon them by the absoluteness and universality of their powers. The pastoral spirit will assume a preeminent and guiding role above the administrative function. However, the prevailing conception of the state exacerbates and perpetuates this misunderstanding. The state is an ethical-legal reality—but fundamentally an ethical one—a unified expression of a shared set of sentiments and intentions that are politically aligned with it. The legal order alone is not the State. Nor, much less, are the administrative order—conceived as an autonomous entity detached from its ethical-political foundations—the current forms through which that order is implemented, or its human embodiments.

The specious identification of the State with the administration has favored bureaucracy, which is a political amplification of administrative authority—that is, administrative subjugation. Consequently,

the State—which should have and must maintain its ethical-political preeminence in an unblemished state—is necessarily caught in an antithesis that can become a political antithesis between the citizen and the state-administration when the administration usurps political power, exercising it without drawing its sustenance from the morality and sensibilities of the people. When bureaucracy usurps political power despite its categorical inability to exercise it, the totalitarian state is reduced to an administrative organization operating with full powers. It creates and sustains, outside itself, an alien and autonomous reality, nourished and sustained by those very sentiments—that living, vibrant humanity—which can find its capacity for interpretation and assimilation only in the political body that represents it. Hence the detachment and clash between the living, ever-renewing people—with their human needs and their sense of an orderly and efficient community—and the incomprehension of the administrative state, which lags behind, with its loss of vital energy, its stagnation that is not stability, its complications and compromises that are not adherence, and its presumption that is not collaboration. The revolution dies or is exhausted within the administrative state and, at best, is distorted, delayed, and thwarted by it. The old pre-liberal regimes fell precisely because of their inability to adapt, assimilate, and be responsive, and because they failed to keep open the channels for a natural renewal in light of changed political conditions. Totalitarian administrations easily become outdated and tend to exist outside the reality that forms around them. This overstepping of the administration's executive authority compromises the state as an autonomous political reality and imposes its own sterility upon it.

155 For an indirect confirmation of this conviction of ours, see what he said to N. d'Aroma in April 1941, in *Mussolini Segreto*, op. cit., p. 232: "It is easy to speak ill of bureaucrats; it is convenient and a foolish habit of the lazy. I have been a bureaucrat for more than twenty years, and I must say that I hold them in the highest regard. After the war—which we will win—I will change the fate of this hardworking and serious class. I will grant them the most absolute self-governance regarding their posts and careers, and I will ensure that the State provides sufficiently and decently for their livelihoods, their children's education, and the dignity of their families. I will ensure that the children of civil servants are given preference in following in their fathers' footsteps, and for them there will be boarding schools and every possible form of assistance. I am proud to be a bureaucrat!"

Such a harsh stance—and in a context—we will have to return to this text later—that consists entirely of criticism not of a theoretical or abstract nature, but of the regime's actual reality—leaves little doubt in our minds that its author did not consider the matter definitively closed.

Having concluded our discussion of bureaucracy and the new model of power management envisioned by Mussolini, let us return to the "totalitarian turn" implemented in the late 1930s. So far, we have discussed aspects that cannot be equated with the reality of true totalitarianisms. We must now address the two aspects that, on the other hand, bring fascism closer to the totalitarian model: the tendency toward a complete concentration of power in the state and that toward the total politicization of civil society.

Fascism and Mussolini had always moved in the first direction, making it the cornerstone of their entire political program, both in theory and in practice. Fascism (both in its Gentilian essence and in its many anti-Gentilian forms), as Emilio Gentile '57 rightly wrote, encapsulated in the myth of the state and in activism as a way of life the essential characteristics of its ideology, which distinguished it from other political ideologies of our time. Fascism was above all an ideology of the state, asserting its irrepressible and totalitarian nature as necessary to impose order on the masses and prevent society from degenerating into chaos.

For Mussolini, concerned above all with asserting his authority over everything and everyone, the issue of the state had for years been summed up in the 1925 slogan: “Everything in the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state,” reiterated in the Gentilian section of the Doctrine of Fascism: “neither individuals outside the state, nor groups (political parties, associations, unions, classes)”158. Despite his tactical approach and although he often had to accept that the State did not “transcend” and “coordinate” in accordance with its “higher purpose,” all the conflicting interests of individuals and groups, the “Duce” never ceased to regard this as the primary goal to be achieved, so that one day the State might effectively become “an indivisible monad, a citadel in which there can be no antitheses, neither of individuals nor of groups,” capable of controlling all organizations outside itself and of not being controlled from within.[159] The political weakening of the PNF and its reduction to a state organ explicitly subordinate to the state, the “unblocking” of the Rossoni trade union organization, and—during the period in question—the gradual de facto disempowerment of the Grand Council had all been and continued to be steps in this direction.

Beyond this immediately political significance, the question of the nature and character of the fascist state also had other implications—far from trivial for the future of the regime and of fascism. Highly significant in this regard is the debate on the relationship between the Regime and the State and on the nature and development of these two entities, which took place among the fascist jurists and ideologues most actively engaged in defining that future. Were the regime and the state one and the same (or should they strive to become so), or should they remain two distinct entities? In other words, was one destined to eventually absorb the other? The question might seem of little interest; in reality, however, it concealed—and not even very subtly—diverse political and ideological hypotheses of great significance. Stripping the issue down to its essentials and setting aside those who either sought to preserve, to some extent, the foundations of the constitutional state or were concerned only with appearing “in line” and pleasing just about everyone, it can be said that for some—a typical example being Sergio

Panunzio[160]—the Regime was to be regarded as a transitional phase of the emerging state (“the idea becomes a party; the party becomes a regime; the regime becomes a state”), while for others—as in the case of Carlo Costamagna 161—the Regime was to be attributed “an organic and immanent significance,” and therefore the idea of its extinction had to be rejected. Translated into political terms, Panunzio’s position (like that of all those who prioritized the internal—that is, social—dimension) tended to argue that the fascist revolutionary process should be aimed at building a new type of state, which, “descending from its empyrean and the world of clouds, taking shape on earth, becomes a Syndicate,” while the Trade Union, in turn ceasing “to live in the lower sphere of the economy and material needs,” “rises from the economy to politics; that is, through the Corporations, it reaches the State.”[162] Costamagna’s position, on the other hand, tended to favor an entirely different line of development. He did not deny the corporatist aspect, but he denied that one could speak of a corporatist state—that is, that corporatism could be made the very essence of the fascist “New State.” For him, this was a different concept—one that was entirely new compared to the idea of the state that had developed in the modern era (which Panunzio did not deny, even though he wanted it to evolve beyond the two conceptions of the “people’s state” of the French Revolution and the “class state” of the Bolshevik Revolution to arrive at that of the “society-state” or, as he put it for obvious reasons, the “nation-state”): while the material aspects of the social order pertained to the Regime, the task and essence of the “New State” was to realize the spiritual aspects—namely, an effective national consciousness and an ideal European mission. The Roman imperial state, with its dual system of provinces and protectorates, had achieved—uniquely in the world—a sense of global collaboration and association. The task of the “New State” was to become the bearer and implementer, in modern terms, of that sense

of collaboration and association. The “problem of European civilization”—caught in the grip of the “exuberant individuality” and “empirical imperialisms” of the nations, as well as the more or less open revolt of the colonial peoples—was now to move beyond the “modern nation-state” and find new forms of collaboration and association, both in new “imperial aggregates” (intended to replace “the nationalist anthill established by the Treaty of Versailles”) and in a restoration of the idea of Europe capable of serving as the foundation for a “regional organization” able to embrace both “the original nuclei of the race, which are still the driving forces of world politics” and “the peoples of foreign races, whom we cannot reduce to the level of our spirit, yet whom we must in many cases bind to our destiny.” Resolving this problem by bringing about the “New State” was the Regime’s most important and loftiest task. Fascist Italy, heir to Rome, seemed to Costamagna “destined by the balanced nature of its genius, by its specific tradition, and by its very geographical position for the supreme task of synthesis, which cannot be merely the result of the imposition of force.” As can be seen, the two positions were not only vastly different—drawing on completely distinct and irreconcilable legal, philosophical, and cultural traditions and influences—but they also foreshadowed two equally divergent paths of development for fascism and for Italy. Stripped of all their respective ideological superstructures, one —the one we have illustrated by referring to Panunzio—tended to place domestic policy, and above all its more strictly social aspect, at the center of the regime’s efforts; the other—the one we have illustrated by referring to Costamagna—tended to direct these efforts primarily toward foreign policy and, moreover, with a type of argumentation and cultural and legal references that clearly revealed how this commitment was situated within an ideological and political context based on the premise of a clear alignment with Nazi Germany and the inevitability of a conflict with the powers that—like Carthage in antiquity—represented the “chthonic” forces of society.

Even though his political realism was beginning to wane and—as we shall see—to be tainted by conflicting influences, Mussolini paid very little attention to these legal and ideological speculations. This does not mean, however, that he did not also give thought to the same issues—albeit in different terms, with different priorities, and with his characteristic flexibility and pragmatism.[163] Above all, it does not mean that he did not relate them to his general conception of the fascist state, even though he realized the need to keep the various issues distinct and, in particular, not to confuse the general issue— that of the essence and realization of the fascist state— with the specific issue of strengthening the state as the executive branch—the government—expanding and homogenizing its power, and reinforcing its own position and that of the regime in preparation for a showdown with the monarchy. Once this strengthening was achieved, he could in fact have begun to think concretely about completing the constitutional reform, which had been initiated in previous years in small steps and “by erosion,” by explicitly tackling the Statute head-on. If one views the matter from this perspective, it is certainly not without significance that the Grand Council’s final approval of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations (on March 14, 1938) was followed, on the very same day, by the Grand Council’s resolution to “proceed with the completion of the constitutional reform by updating the Statute of the Kingdom” and, a little over two weeks later, the coup d’état surrounding the first appointment of the Marshal. Indeed, one naturally wonders whether the fact that the “update of the Statute” was never mentioned again can be explained solely by the deteriorating international situation, or whether it is more accurate to attribute it also to the crisis in relations between Mussolini and the sovereign caused by the affair surrounding the first appointment of the Marshal.

Mussolini had been speaking as early as November 14, 1933, about a not-too-distant transformation of the Chamber of Deputies into a body more suited to the new times. Announcing to the National Council of Corporations that the new Chamber would be constituted according to the same criteria as the one resulting from the 1929 “plebiscite,” he had said: “But at some point, the Chamber will have to decide its own destiny.” And he had added: “I have never liked the Chamber of Deputies”; “it is

anachronistic"; it is an institution "that we inherited and that is foreign to our mindset" and that "presupposes a world that we have demolished." He had also hinted at the direction he favored: "It is perfectly conceivable that a National Council of Corporations could entirely replace the current Chamber of Deputies." And he returned to the subject nearly two and a half years later, speaking on March 23, 1936, to the National Assembly of Corporations. "The Chamber," he had said, "will give way to the National Assembly of Corporations, which will be constituted as the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations and will initially consist of all twenty-two corporations." The manner of the transformation, the powers and prerogatives of the new Chamber, and its nature would be decided by the Grand Council. One thing, however, he had already anticipated: the new Chamber would be an "entirely political" body; economic forces would be represented there by the Corporations, while non-economic forces would be represented by the party and recognized associations. The date for all this was not far off.[165]

The need to transform the Chamber of Deputies had long been discussed in Fascist circles, even before the "Duce" publicly alluded to it. The corporatists would have liked the new Chamber to officially enshrine the integration of the corporatist system into the political system. Many Fascists, especially those of the earliest generation—typically represented, despite their differing positions on other issues, by Farinacci and Panunzio—viewed such a solution with suspicion, however, fearing that it would weaken Fascist power to the benefit of corporatist power—that is, the economic forces—and result in a further diminution of the party's political function and influence.[166] With his statement of March 23, 1936, however, Mussolini had put an end to these discussions, coming out, as noted, essentially in favor of the corporatists' position. And this was the case even though it is difficult to imagine that, in his mind, the transformation of the Chamber was intended to enshrine the corporatist character of the Fascist state.

We have already discussed Mussolini's uncertainties regarding the actual significance the corporatist system was supposed to have within the regime's structure, how to implement it, what powers to grant it, his refusal to define its characteristics, his insistence on emphasizing the experimental nature of everything being done in this field, and the long timeframe within which action would have to be taken ("'the entire century lies before us,' he had said in 1934") and, finally, the care he took, just in case, to make the figure of the head of government the keystone, the true center of power, of whatever little of the corporatist system was being set in motion.[167] This attitude, characteristic of Mussolini's position in the first half of the 1930s, had certainly not changed in the second half. If anything, under the pressure of the international situation and, therefore, the need to avoid experiments that might prove harmful and complicate relations with the business world, it had intensified to the point of prompting the "Duce" not to hide his impatience toward those who, with their ceaseless theorizing about corporatism, constantly sought to raise the issue of the theoretical definition and implementation of the corporatist system. A typical example is a remark he directed at them on May 15, 1937, while speaking before the Third General Assembly of the Corporations[168]:

Too many vacillating philosophers had pontificated on the guilds, with the result of muddling ideas and making simple truths abstruse.

Given this reality, the explanation for the decision to establish the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations should not be sought in the corporatist sphere. In this sphere, at most, the new Chamber can be considered a sort of sop offered to the corporatists and the Fascist youth to give them the illusion that something was happening in this area. The true explanation must be sought elsewhere. In the realm—as has been said—of strengthening the executive branch, the government, and the regime.

That Parliament had lost its function, its constitutional powers, and—especially the Chamber of Deputies—its prestige[169] was not only a fact but was acknowledged and indeed theorized by many Fascists. There is no need to dwell on the challenge to the principle of representation. Suffice it to say that it was considered so outdated that even after the establishment of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, many would have preferred not to speak of the representation of political and economic bodies but rather of the organization of the nation. For the purposes of our discussion, however, the challenge to the principle of the separation of powers is more important. For the future of the regime, putting an end once and for all to this "typical product of liberal theory and the democratic mindset" was, in fact, of great importance. Obviously, opinions varied. They ranged from the most extremist views—which regarded the "hierarchical" and "institutional" principles as two fascist tenets irreconcilable with the separation of powers—to the more moderate ones, which—by downgrading the three classical branches to mere functions of the state—advocated the need for a fourth function, the "function of government," which would coordinate them and to which hierarchical supremacy would be assigned. On a practical level, however, these differences in position did not alter the terms of the issue in any way. As for Mussolini, what mattered to him was that the principle of the separation of powers be officially abolished, that the executive be elevated above the others, and that the latter be reduced to its functions (in 1939, addressing the highest ranks of the judiciary, he would be explicit: "In my conception, there is no separation of powers within the State… power is unitary: there is no longer a separation of powers; there is a separation of functions"170) and, in particular, that Parliament—as C. A. Biggini would write in 1940 in a commentary on the new constitutional order established with the creation of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations171—become a body integrated into the government, one that "does not condition the existence of the government." In addition to satisfying many Fascists and constituting a further step toward reaffirming the totalitarian nature of the regime, enshrining this principle in the Constitution was important to him—not so much for the present as for the future, in anticipation of his succession. From a strictly constitutional standpoint, the sovereign's position vis-à-vis the government would in fact have been left without any parliamentary backing, whereas the regime, even in the event of a vacancy in the office of head of government, would still have retained the backing of the Grand Council.

1W Even members of the government often did not even attempt to keep up appearances. It was not uncommon for sessions to be held in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate at which not a single member of the government was present for much of the proceedings, to the point that in December 1937, the President of the Senate, Federzoni, felt the need to bring this matter to the attention of the Undersecretary to the Prime Minister's Office. See ACS, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Cabinet (1937–39), file 1-5-1/3511.

Following Mussolini's announcement on March 23, 1936, the Grand Council gave the go-ahead for the reform of the Chamber of Deputies on November 18 of that year by appointing a commission (C. Ciano, Starace, Solmi, Bottai, and Lantini) tasked with drafting the relevant proposals. From Bottai's diary, we know that a brief preliminary discussion took place among the members of the Grand Council, during which Farinacci and Balbo declared themselves (it is difficult to say whether this was to safeguard, to some extent, the prestige and role of the Grand Council or based on more general political considerations) in favor of maintaining the elective nature of the members of the new Chamber, and Mussolini did not take a position on the matter, deferring to whatever the commission would propose.[172] The commission was tasked with reporting back at the next session[173]; however, when it met in March 1937, the commission announced that it still needed a couple of months to complete its work[174], so that the examination of the proposals—given the increasingly slow pace at

which Mussolini was now convening the Grand Council—did not begin until March of the following year.

The extremely limited documentation available[175] makes it impossible to reconstruct the development of the reform satisfactorily. From the as-yet-unpublished memoirs of Tullio Cianetti (*A Fascist at Castelvecchio*), we know that “all the organizations of the Regime submitted proposals and studies to the commission that certainly did not lack ingenuity or boldness,” so that “there was raw material to fundamentally transform the representative function in order to make it fairer and, above all, more in line with the reality of interests.” Starace, however, opposed them all uncompromisingly. According to Cianetti, the Party Secretary—who was a member of that commission—viewed those proposals as academic ramblings and the delusions of misguided men. He saw a seriously implemented constitutional reform as an attack on the Party’s primacy and failed to realize that, while the PNF was being stripped of the useless and harmful trinkets it had hitherto favored, it was nevertheless being handed effective and practical tools. He did not understand this, and since arrogance is the firstborn daughter of ignorance, he assumed the posture in that commission that suited him least of all: that of the doctrinaire. Bottai and Lantini contested him inch by inch, but then had to fall silent when he threw into the balance something that was supposed to be compared—who knows why—to Brennus’s sword.

We are also familiar with the text of the report presented by A. Solmi, in his dual capacity as a member of the commission and Minister of Justice, in which he outlined “only a few fundamental principles of the reform,” it was proposed that the future Chamber—in line with what Mussolini had foreshadowed—would result from the merger of the National Council of the PNF and the National Council of Corporations, and the theory of the separation of powers was vigorously criticized, while the abandonment of the elective system was merely given a brief mention in reference to the “system of functions” on which the reform was to be based. Some documents, however, mention a “previous” draft in which it was reportedly envisaged that the Grand Council would still be responsible for appointing—based on proposals submitted by the PNF secretary and the trade union confederations—the members (400, not approximately 600 as later established) of the new Chamber. It is therefore reasonable to assume that events unfolded, broadly speaking, as described in his memoirs (though he confused the March session of the Grand Council with the subsequent October session) by G. Acerbo, who was a member of the Grand Council at the time. Acerbo wrote:[176]

It should be recalled that in the fall of 1938, on the occasion of the Grand Council’s approval of the draft charter for the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, the Minister of Justice, the Honorable Solmi, had presented a proposal for a plebiscite by universal suffrage that was to be repeated every five years for the purpose of gauging popular support for the totalitarian regime. But even this initiative for a formal legalization of the existing order failed due to opposition from the party secretary; and the bill was withdrawn during the same session by decision of the Duce, who the day before had fully agreed with the proposing minister on the necessity—especially with regard to repercussions abroad—of that periodic consultation.

It is therefore difficult to form a clear picture not only of the course of the committee’s work and—on March 1, 1938—that of the Grand Council, but also of the texts actually submitted to it. Solmi likely presented two reform proposals to the Grand Council, corresponding to the two positions that must have emerged within the Grand Council and the committee; the highest body of Fascism had to decide between them, ultimately adopting the one supported by Starace. What can be said with certainty is that—once the fundamental principles of the reform had been approved—the commission was tasked with drafting the text of the relevant bill and submitting it promptly to the Grand Council so that the new Chamber could be inaugurated on March 23, 1939. This took place during the session of October 7,

during which Solmi delivered a comprehensive report explaining the bill drafted by the committee,[177] which, with minimal formal changes, would first become the report with which the bill would be submitted for approval by the Council of Ministers (which took place on November 7) and then (except for the minor "mysterious incident" we will discuss shortly) the report with which the bill would be presented by Mussolini to the Chambers. During the same session, the Grand Council also approved another draft bill amending the composition of the National Council of Corporations so that it could become part of the new Chamber (in the previous session, the composition of the National Council of the PNF had already been amended for the same purpose).

In Appendix (No. 2), the reader can find the text of the law establishing the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, approved by Parliament (by the Chamber of Deputies on December 14 and by the Senate five days later); a few words are therefore sufficient to explain its substance. In terms of composition, the new Chamber—as already mentioned—consisted of the National Council of the PNF and the National Council of Corporations. Its members (the national councilors, as they were called at Bottai's suggestion) took office and were removed from office in accordance with their membership in one of the two councils that together formed it. Consequently, on the one hand, this body would never be dissolved (even if, for convenience, its work continued to be divided into legislative sessions) and, on the other hand, it would be continuously renewed. From a general perspective—the one that must have been closest to Mussolini's heart—Article 2 established once and for

177 The only reference to the commission's work is found, under the date of July 14, 1938, in G. Bottai's Diary (ff. 561 ff.). According to Bottai, the draft prepared by the commission did nothing to resolve the real problems in the relationship between the Party and the corporations; "All of Starace's zeal" was directed solely toward "institutionally cementing the exceptional status of the 'Duce.'" For the commission's work, see also A. Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario*, op. cit., p. 274.

It was stated that the institutional task of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations and the Senate (since the measure also involved the Senate, thus paving the way for its reform) was to "collaborate" with the government "in the drafting of laws." In terms of operation, this task was assigned in part to the plenary assembly (with regard to bills of a constitutional nature, general legislative delegations, and the budget estimates and final accounts of the State, of autonomous state agencies, and—as requested and obtained during the approval process by the special committee tasked with reporting on the founding bill[178] —of state-subsidized administrative bodies of national importance) and partly to the legislative committees (for everything else); while this undoubtedly expedited parliamentary proceedings, it further eroded what little prestige such a reform had left for Parliament.[179]

Before concluding this discussion, however, we must pause for a moment to consider what we have called a minor "mystery." The text of the bill approved by the Grand Council was, apart from minor and entirely formal aspects, the same as that approved by the Council of Ministers and then (aside from the addition to Article 15 that we have mentioned) by Parliament. Yet both the text of the bill prepared for Parliament and the report that was to accompany it (in practice, as has been noted, Solmi's report to the Grand Council, slightly pared down) contain an addition at the end of Article 5 that is extremely important and which, according to a "note for the Duce" from the Office of the Prime Minister dated November 30, was intended by Mussolini. The addition stipulated that women as well

178 The only amendment introduced by the Chamber of Deputies—with the prior consent of the "Duce"—in the text of the bill forwarded to it concerned Article 15 and, in particular, the addition of administrative bodies of national importance subsidized directly or indirectly by the State to the list of

those over which the two Chambers exercised their control. On the consequences of this amendment, see Isle, Indagine sulla funzionalità del Parlamento, I, Milan 1968, pp. 322 and 361. “Through this [oversight] mechanism, the legislative authority of the corporations and inter-union agreements (collective economic agreements) was limited—or at least was intended to be seriously limited—as the Head of Government could refer such matters to multiple joint legislative committees or to the committee with jurisdiction over the subject matter” (p. 322). See Parliamentary Proceedings, Chamber of Deputies, Documents, No. 2655 A: “Report of the Special Committee… on the bill… Establishment of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, presented during the afternoon session of December 7, 1938-xvii.”

179 Nevertheless, there were many who, before the new structure of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations was made known—and thus before it became clear that membership was restricted to members of the National Council of the PNF or the National Council of Corporations—made no secret of their ambitions to become members. In this regard, what Starace wrote in the “Foglio di disposizioni” No. 1163, dated October 9, 1938, is significant:

“Attention!

“The Federal Secretaries shall inform me of the names of those who, if any, exhibit signs of an uncontrollable aspiration to the National Council. Such signs can only be indicative of a backward mentality, still afflicted by remnants of electoral frenzy. It must therefore be categorically ruled out, when dealing with such an individual, that he is a Fascist.

“Attention!”

could have been National Councilors. There is no trace of this in any document submitted to the Grand Council or the Council of Ministers. Obviously, the “mystery” does not lie in the fact that Mussolini had the clause added without first having it approved by the Grand Council and the Council of Ministers. When something was truly close to his heart, the “Duce” certainly did not stop in the face of such “obstacles.” The “mystery” lies rather in the fact that the clause does not appear either in the text of the bill or in that of the accompanying report examined by the Chamber and—officially—submitted to it on November 29, that is, the day before the “note” we mentioned was drafted and the very same day on which, according to another “note for the Duce,” the Cabinet of the Presidency asked Mussolini whether, “on the occasion of the next reconvening of the Fascist Chamber,” he wished to present the bill personally or whether it should be sent to the Chamber’s presidency “in the customary manner.” Since on December 1 the Speaker of the Chamber, announcing that the bill had been submitted, appointed a special committee to examine the bill and report on it to the assembly, and since the two texts were distributed to the deputies only after they had been printed, that is, on the eve of their examination by the special committee, one can only conclude that the deletion occurred during the very few days that elapsed between the bill’s transmission to the Chamber and its examination by the special committee. And, in fact, this is also evident from the documentation preserved in the Chamber’s archives[180]: the deletion was made—on December 3—by the Minister of Justice while proofreading the two texts prior to their distribution to the deputies. Herein lies the real “mystery.” It is impossible to imagine that Solmi—who, moreover, had been informed by telephone by the “Duce’s” Secretariat of Mussolini’s intention to make the addition and had given his approval—would have proceeded on his own initiative to remove it. The decision was certainly Mussolini’s. But how can it be explained? What could have led Mussolini to abandon at the last moment something to which he undoubtedly attached great importance? In the absence of any evidence capable of shedding light on the matter, we can only speculate. And it seems to us there can be only two possibilities: either that in the Grand Council

(which met precisely on the night of November 30 to December 1), where there was certainly no shortage of opponents to such a "revolution," someone, having been informed of the matter, had objected, and Mussolini had not deemed it appropriate to engage in a "showdown" over an issue that might have been close to his heart, but not to the point of asserting his authority; or, more likely, that at the last moment Solmi had realized that this small addition could provoke a new major crisis with the king, and Mussolini, having been informed of this, had decided to drop the matter. It is almost certain that Victor Emmanuel would have opposed the addition, both because of his misogynism and because of the consequences that the admission of women to the Chamber of Deputies would sooner or later have had for the Senate. But the crisis would have been even more serious—and such that Mussolini could not have justified himself in any way—primarily for one reason: the king had authorized the presentation of the bill to Parliament on November 1, at San Rossore, in the text approved by the Council of Ministers and therefore without the addition concerning women. Presenting a different text would therefore have been an impropriety that would have given the sovereign a most valuable weapon. Mussolini might have overlooked this (and psychologically, this is highly significant), but once it was brought to his attention, he certainly could not underestimate the risk.

However seemingly insignificant, this episode merits some consideration, both because its outcome gives us a glimpse of the actual limits of power that the "Duce" possessed at that time—or, at any rate, did not deem it appropriate to exceed—and because, if left unexplained, it might appear not only incomprehensible but also contradictory to a defining aspect of Mussolini's stance: his hostility toward women's participation in public life in general and in Fascist Italy in particular.

Early Fascism, the Sansepolcrist movement, had not harbored anti-feminist prejudices and had, in fact, granted women the right to vote and hold office. Its ranks also included a number of women, some of whom came from the Socialist Party or other left-wing groups (M. Sarfatti, G. Brebbia, R. Teruzzi, etc.), from Futurism and petty-bourgeois radicalism, and some of whom were mobilized by the Fiuman movement or directly by Fascism itself. At least six women participated in the founding of the Fasci di combattimento on March 23, 1919. Others joined subsequently, even forming several women's fascist groups, to the extent that by early 1922 the party had published a draft charter for them. Moreover, in 1921–22—in parallel with the influx into Fascism of socially and culturally increasingly diverse elements, many of whom regarded the inferiority of women as an indisputable fact and viewed negatively the role women had come to assume during the war in Italian society and particularly in the workforce, and given Mussolini's growing need to take into account a whole range of psychological and political attitudes—whether among the masses, other political forces, or the Church—Fascism's stance on women's issues, and thus on women's suffrage as well, had gradually become more cautious and restrictive. Nevertheless, for some time still (until 1925), a segment of bourgeois feminism continued to regard fascism and feminism as "sister forces." This assessment undoubtedly contained a fair amount of naivety and a failure to understand what fascism was becoming and the influence that last-minute fascists and "supporters" had come to exert—and continued to exert—on it. However, there were some positive factors that justified this view, at least in part. In particular, there was the stance taken by Mussolini and certain sectors of the fascist movement regarding women's suffrage.[181]

The possibility for women to obtain the right to vote in political elections had practically already faded before the "March on Rome." After fascism came to power, however, the possibility opened up for women—or, more precisely, for some of them—to obtain at least the right to vote in administrative elections. This opportunity was opened up by a government bill introduced in 1923 (commonly associated with the name of the Honorable Acerbo, who was tasked with supporting it in the Chamber of Deputies) and personally defended by Mussolini against large sectors of the National Fascist Party (PNF) and the majority, to the point that he reintroduced it the following year since—having not yet

been approved at the time of the Chamber's dissolution—it had lapsed. The bill, finally approved in the second half of 1925, granted the right to vote only to women who had completed lower elementary school or paid a specified tax, exercised parental authority or guardianship, had certain civil merits, or were mothers or widows of those killed in war. In practice, it never came into effect (unless one considers a few cases of women appointed as honorary members of municipal councils), since shortly after its approval, the Fascist government abolished the elective nature of municipal and provincial councils. Nevertheless, it remains of considerable interest to us.

Its presentation and its forceful defense by Mussolini and Acerbo in the Chamber of Deputies and elsewhere against criticism from influential members of the majority (D. Lupi, N. Terzaghi, G. Caradonna, etc.) were in response to

181 There is no truly satisfactory study on Fascism's attitude toward women's issues and, more generally, the status of women. For preliminary information, however, see P. Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare*. Ideologia e politica della donna e della famiglia durante il fascismo, Rimini-Florence 1975, and above all F. Pieroni Bortolotti, *Feminism and Political Parties in Italy 1919–1926*, Rome 1978. From the Fascist perspective, M. Castellani's *Italian Women of Yesterday and Today*, Florence 1937, is of some use.

certainly part of a very specific political calculation. On the one hand, they aimed to present Fascism in a modern and progressive light and to win the sympathy of the various Italian and, above all, international associations in favor of women's suffrage (in May 1923, when the ninth congress of the International Alliance for Women's Suffrage was held in Rome, Mussolini took care to attend and deliver a rather open speech, even though the issue of the political vote was framed there in the context of the long term182); on the other hand, through these initiatives, Mussolini, in addition to meeting the demands of fascist women and rewarding their "sense of moderation," their political sensitivity in not having dramatized the issue, was, so to speak, taking precautions to avoid the risk that moderate feminists might turn their sympathies toward the People's Party, which had fought for the granting of political and administrative suffrage to women since its founding. However, this explanation is not sufficient. In addition to these motivations, there were others—essentially the same ones that, in 1938, must have prompted Mussolini to consider admitting women to the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations.

Personally, Mussolini was never receptive to feminist demands, not even when he was a socialist, nor in the immediate postwar period when, even so, the Fasci di Combattimento were championing women's suffrage. He denied that women possessed a true capacity for synthesis and, therefore, for great spiritual creations. He stated this in the Chamber on May 15, 1925, speaking in support of the bill on local elections, and he repeated it years later to Ludwig, specifying that women "are analytical, not synthetic." For him, women were made to obey and could not play a significant role in political life.[184] Their role, even at that time, was that of "wife and mother." And this conviction of his would gradually grow stronger as his belief became more radicalized that the future of Western peoples depended directly on their ability to counter the Malthusian tendencies typical of modern society and to grow demographically. That said, it must also be noted that he was well aware that during the war women had made great sacrifices (and that they had made even greater ones

182 See Mussolini, XIX, pp. 215 ff. (May 14, 1923). On June 1, Mussolini also spoke in Padua at the women's congress of the Three Venices. The speech (see ibid., pp. 226 ff.) took on an entirely different tone, however. First of all, it was almost entirely devoted to issues of general politics; as for the brief passage in which he spoke of women's suffrage, he did so in terms far less positive than those used at

the Rome congress: “What does the vote matter? You will have it! But even in times when women did not vote and did not wish to vote—in times past, whether distant, remote, or near—women have always exerted a decisive influence in shaping the destinies of human societies.”

(they would have had to do so in the near future), proving themselves, above all, fully up to the task, and that—whether one liked it or not—capitalism and modern development tended to enhance their role in society. He based much of his speech to the Chamber on May 15, 1925, on these two issues, among others. And not by chance; for while the granting of local voting rights to women had, for him, the immediate political motivations we have mentioned, it was also linked to his desire to perform an act that would serve as public recognition of women’s sacrifices and merits during the war years: this is demonstrated by the inclusion among those eligible to vote of the mothers and wives of those who had fallen in the war, and by the emphasis placed on this point.[185]

In 1938, a combination of similar reasoning and sentiments must have prompted Mussolini to admit women to the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations. On a more immediately political level, his decision may have been motivated by the desire to establish in advance an instrument that would offer him a pretext to undertake, whenever he wished, a genuine reform of the Senate as well. On a more general level, his decision (which, for him, was above all risk-free, since for the overwhelming majority of women and given the structure of the regime, it would have had no consequences) was instead intended —and we would say sincerely—to constitute a recognition, a sort of “solemn tribute” to Italian women for their sacrifices, their self-denial, and their stance toward Fascism, particularly in recent years. A “tangible” recognition that would give substance to what, in June of the previous year, he had told them on the occasion of the inauguration in Rome of the exhibition on summer camps and child care:

“During these fifteen years, hard and magnificent”—he had said after reminding them of the specific duties of Italian and Fascist women: to be the “guardians of the hearth” and the mothers of the “generations of soldiers and pioneers necessary to defend the empire” 186 — Italian women have given endless proof of their courage and self-sacrifice: they were the soul of the resistance against the shameful Geneva siege; they gave their rings to the fatherland; they accepted the sacrifices necessary to achieve victory with that pride and restrained sorrow found in the traditions of heroic Italian mothers;

and which he had reiterated—somewhat more bureaucratically, lacking the crowd that had cheered him on the previous occasion—a few months earlier, praising “the lofty Fascist spirit that animates Italian women”187.

From the anti-sanctions reaction to fervent collaboration in the realm of autarky, to the manifold and far-reaching activities carried out across various social sectors, she—with the constant contribution of her intelligent and industrious understanding—proves to be an irreplaceable element in achieving the national solidarity proclaimed by Fascism and a faithful collaborator of the regime.

Apart from the establishment of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, no other significant institutional steps were taken during the second half of the 1930s toward the concentration of power in the state. However, many minor incidents that occurred during these years at other levels indicate that everything was moving in this direction. At this point, however, we can do no more than note this trend. Nor, on the other hand, given how far things had progressed, were any other truly significant steps possible—unless one considered the situation ripe for the decisive move: the elimination of the diarchy. During this same period, however, there were many important steps taken along another path —that of the total politicization of civil society, to the point of eliminating the distinction between the state and civil society. This objective not only corresponded to the ideology and internal logic of

fascism but, at that moment, presented itself as the most important and urgent of all, since only its realization could have placed fascism in the optimal position to address and resolve the problem of the monarchy and the “post-Mussolini” era.

As many scholars have clearly pointed out, the elimination of the distinction between the state and civil society through the total politicization of the latter was one of the defining objectives of all totalitarian regimes, if not the most important one. From this perspective, fascism behaved in the second half of the 1930s (though there had been earlier manifestations along the same lines) much like Nazism and Stalinism. To stop at this observation, however, would be tantamount to forfeiting the opportunity to grasp the peculiarities of fascist “totalitarianism” and to understand how it differed from Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism (we will not delve here into the question of the differences—which, in our view, are quite significant—between the two).

There are various perspectives from which one can approach the issue without stopping at its surface, yet without expanding on it excessively. The most suitable is perhaps that offered by two complementary observations: that of D. Fisichella, who states that “Fascism had a doctrine of the total state, but it was not an ideology of the totalitarian regime,” and that of E. Gentile, according to whom “the essential element that characterized the ideology of Italian fascism was the assertion of the primacy of political action—that is, totalitarianism—understood as the total dissolution of the private into the public, as the subordination of values pertaining to private life (religion, culture, morality, affections, etc.) to the political value par excellence, the State”188. Both observations, in fact, accurately capture the distinctive nature of both the aspect of Fascist politics that concerns us here and, more generally, of Fascist “totalitarianism.” In Nazism and Stalinism, the state was essentially a secondary element of power. This point—essential for a proper understanding of the issue at hand—has been extensively studied; thus, for the purposes of our discussion, it suffices to refer to the synthesis of the conclusions reached by those who have addressed it, as presented by Fisichella189:

The point is that the totalitarian institutional system exhibits neither unity nor organic coherence nor homogeneity. Alongside and in conflict with the state structure, in fact, stands the structure of the revolutionary movement (or single party). Hans Buchheim summarizes the uniqueness of this situation very well by noting that “the new and fully conscious totalitarian aspiration to power not only can no longer be derived from the categories of state domination, but, on the contrary, develops and is realized in explicit and open opposition to the state. Genuine totalitarian thought is subversive in the broadest sense of the word, in that it establishes an antithesis to the ‘governmental’ form of state domination.” The state is sovereign and authorized to use force insofar as it represents the “whole” and the general interest in relation to particular interests. The totalitarian movement, however, does not consider itself —vis-à-vis society and the state, which is its institutional expression—as a part to be united, associated, and joined with other parts to form the whole. Rather, it regards itself as the germ cell of a new reality within the old social universe, which has already lost its historical right to exist. This leads it to deny the state its sovereign nature and its “general” essence, allowing it to survive more as an “anatomical” fact than as a “functional” entity and decision-making center.

From this perspective, the distrust—which borders on hostility and contempt—that totalitarian regimes harbor toward the state and its traditional institutions, both civil and military, is significant, extending even to the rejection of “conventional” sentiments of patriotism. While it is unnecessary to recall the communist position regarding the state and the historical inevitability of its extinction, “what is less well known and almost deliberately forgotten”—writes Linz—“is that Hitler, in *Mein Kampf*, expressed his hostility toward the state and the traditional German *Staatsglàubigkeit*.” As Friedrich notes, the Führer “despised the state.” He held an “instrumental conception of it, in stark contrast to

German tradition, and indeed to the conception of Mussolini and Italian fascism"... Linked to this "subversive" attitude is the fact that in a totalitarian regime we witness a duplication—and subsequently a multiplication—of the same offices and functions. As a one-party system, totalitarianism is in practice characterized by a dualism between state and party.

Fascism did not recognize such a dualism. Even in Italy, there were fascists who sought to establish the supremacy of the party—the Party-State—and who argued, more or less openly, with the supporters of the Nation-State, the Party-State, or other similar theories of the state, accusing them of not being fully fascist and totalitarian. Always present, the advocates of party supremacy regained confidence as Italy drew closer to Germany and, above all, during the years of World War II, when their demands could be presented as necessary to invigorate the country and make the machinery of the state more efficient. We will discuss this, however, in the next volume. For now, it suffices to note that in this context, proposals such as transferring the responsibilities of the Ministry of Popular Culture—and even those of the Ministry of the Interior—to the National Fascist Party (PNF) were not uncommon. Mussolini, too, was not in the least interested in these controversies and theoretical musings; during the period we are examining, he regarded them—depending on the circumstances, the prevailing moods, and who was promoting them—with pity, boredom, or irritation. He was, however, always extremely vigilant and uncompromising in opposing any further decentralization of power outside the State and, therefore, in reserving for the party—both politically and ideologically—the role of an organ, an "institution" of the State. An organ to which were assigned tasks of great importance for the development of the regime and, consequently, vast power—which it could exercise, however, only within civil society,[191] and which, in any case, was not to interfere with that of the state, that is, the government,[92]. So much so that some scholars—and most explicitly of all, J. Linz[193]—have been able to argue the thesis (at once correct and overly simplistic) that if Fascism did not undergo a true "totalitarian involution," this was due to Mussolini's conception of the state and his policy of drastically containing the pressures coming from the party to overturn it. Nor should one be misled by the fact that even fascists such as—to name just a few—Gentile, Panunzio, Bottai, and Mussolini himself spoke of a "perennial," "eternal," or "permanent" revolution. Especially in the 1930s, these and other similar expressions did not indicate a "subversive" conception with respect to the state (nor did they call for a totalitarian practice of the Nazi or Stalinist kind[194]): their subversive charge, their totalitarianism, was directed at a single target—society—and often aimed solely at demanding greater social commitment from the regime. To quote Panunzio,[95], for them the State was, "in its idea and in its ideal unity," "absolute, eternal, and inexhaustible." The only things subject to change were its forms as they succeeded one another over time, its legal systems, its manifestations in the form of governments, and its substance. Before fascism, the State was "spiritually empty"; with Fascism, it had been filled with an Idea and, therefore, with ideals, faith, and will, so as to finally be able to express "the permanent and enduring consciousness" of the people[196] and to realize its own totality (maxima plenitudo potestatis), that is, "the fullness of the idea and of the power of the idea,"[97]. The consequence of this was that, under fascism, the antithesis between society and the State was replaced by the concrete sameness of the two realities; the otherness of the State and the people was likewise replaced by the living moral identity of the people and the State. The single party, thus, expresses and realizes the political substance of the State, not only in that it incorporates the people into the State, but in that it embodies and lives an idea, which is no longer the abstract idea—albeit presumed universal—of the old parties, but is the idea that derives from the millennia-old traditions of the nation, understood as a historical unity of values and spirits, and expresses the perennial and enduring will of the people themselves, who have become the State 198.

191 As he stated in the Council of Ministers at the end of 1936, in a debate with Starace—who had sought more funds for the PNF's welfare activities—Mussolini argued that "the party wants to do too

many things. The party should concern itself solely with the political education of the Italian people" (G. Bottai, *Ventanni e un giorno*, op. cit., p. 107).

192 The PNF's subordination to the government was such that it had no real power even over the most basic "matters of principle." A typical example was the appointment of non-party members to important state offices, despite the fact that party membership was by law a necessary requirement for holding such positions. In this regard, a letter from Starace to Mussolini dated June 22, 1939—immediately following the appointment of A. Beneduce and C. A. Quilico as senators—is highly significant. ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence (1922–1943), file 242/R, "A. Starace," subfile 1.

But these were merely theoretical considerations. For Videa to effectively express "the permanent and enduring consciousness" of the people, and for the incorporation of society into the State (that is, into the Fascist political system)—and thus their identification with it—to be realized, the people had to become aware of their "permanent and enduring consciousness" and behave accordingly; that is, they had to become, as the Fascists put it, the Nation. In other words—to put the matter in more concrete terms—it was necessary to bring about that effective nationalization of the masses which Italy, unlike other countries¹W, had experienced only to a minimal extent, and for the cultural pluralism that still largely characterized Italian society to be, if not entirely overcome, at least significantly reduced. In other words, a profound, widespread politicization of society was needed; however—precisely due to the lack of a real common denominator (apart from that represented by Catholicism)—rather than taking the form of mass ideologization (which, moreover, was irreconcilable with Mussolini's pragmatism and with the need to take due account of the regime's composite nature and the social and cultural pluralism underpinning it)—had to translate into the formation of a common mass mentality. So that—to quote Panunzio 200 once again—"the atomized and disorganized people, who express their consent and allegiance to the state and its policies sporadically and artificially from time to time, are replaced by the 'organized people,' who express their consent and allegiance continuously and at every moment." Achieving this goal was to be the primary task of the state, through the use of all its instruments: schools, the press, radio, cinema, and above all the party and its affiliated organizations. No other instrument, in fact, could match the party's pervasiveness, intensity, systematic nature of action, and thus its formative function. In the final 1939 issue of *Critica fascista*, Camillo Pellizzi was explicit on this point:[2][0][1]

Politically educating a people does not mean only—nor primarily—sending them to certain schools where certain doctrines are taught. It means, above all, making them live within a given order and in a given atmosphere, and leading them to participate consciously—in an ever deeper and more active way—in the State in all its manifestations and institutions; it also means imparting to ever broader segments of the population, and in an ever clearer and more reasoned manner, an awareness of the changing demands of political life and the new directions that the State requires from time to time. This educational task can never be considered complete, especially given the constant changes in the situation and the problems of social life. Every citizen, even one abundantly gifted with talents, experience, and knowledge, must regard the issue of his or her own political education as perpetually open and, in absolute terms, unresolved.

It is evident that this political education cannot take place without some form of participation, and the doctrines that made the political education of peoples entirely dependent on and derived from their participation in power are well known. This crude and empirical pedagogical-political conception conflated the role of the educator with that of the learner, and could therefore never arrive at an

understanding of the dialectical unity within which these two distinct functions coexist and interrelate. The Fascist Revolution arose, among other things, from a critical overcoming of this conception—and of the resulting parliamentary and electoral systems—whose abstract nature, organic rigidity, and tendency toward atomism in their view of the human person living in society were denounced.

Fascism, however, never intended to a priori exclude any citizen from active participation in the life of the State, nor from any possible direct or indirect collaboration in the work of the government; on the contrary, it aims to bring about an organic circulation of ideas and will between the citizen and the State. It is no coincidence that the system it envisions has been defined as an "integral" or "functional" democracy. That circulation and that participation presuppose two things: first, the direct integration of every individual or group activity—aimed at the production of specific goods and services—into a state framework that guides, coordinates, and represents those activities and the particular interests involved (and this must, or will have to, be provided for by the trade union and corporatist system); second, a continuous, direct political link between the people and the state.

This conception of the role assigned to the PNF—so devoid of autonomy and political initiative vis-à-vis the state and, therefore, so different, despite some apparent similarities, from the role assigned to the party by Nazism and Bolshevism—was certainly not new. Mussolini had advocated it, one might say, from the very beginning—and in particular since A. Turati, having purged the party of elements who would have preferred a party that was a "protagonist" rather than an "executor," had transformed it into an instrument that finally seemed capable of putting this concept into practice. It is certainly no coincidence that one of the first explicit references to this role ("the National Fascist Party is preparing to fulfill the task that is its own: to constitute the educational and formative aristocracy of the Italian people") was made by Mussolini on January 1, 1928, speaking before the PNF leadership immediately after praising Turati for his "great, indelible merit of having purged and refined the party" 202, and that he reiterated it three months later in a similar context; after praising R. Ricci for his work as head of the ONB, he had said 203:

It is not out of place to illustrate the intrinsic nature and profound significance of the Fascist draft. It is not merely a ceremony, but a most important moment in that system of totalitarian and comprehensive education and preparation of the Italian man, which the Fascist revolution considers one of the fundamental and prerequisite tasks of the State—indeed, the fundamental one. Should the State fail to fulfill this task or even agree to discuss it, it purely and simply jeopardizes its very right to exist.

While this conception was not new, the political context in which it was embedded was different. In the late 1920s and the first half of the 1930s, the goal of forming a new Fascist ruling class had either not yet proven unachievable or, in any case, Mussolini could envisage projecting it over the "long term," onto future Fascist generations; and the same can be said for the goal of "Fascistizing" Italian society: even though this "fascistization" was, on the whole, limited, superficial, and conditioned by a whole series of contingent factors—and thus essentially provisional and transitory (so much so that by the end of 1933, the "Duce" had begun to speak with greater insistence on the need to establish the "totalitarian state" and to "experience a period of the highest ideological tension"), nothing, however, suggested that a reversal of the situation or a decline in public support was possible; thus, for the time being, it was sufficient to enable Mussolini and the regime to face the reality of the moment without real concern and to believe they could lay more solid and lasting foundations for public support at a later stage"*. Now, in the second half of the 1930s, the situation was different. Despite the great success achieved in the war in Ethiopia, if the "Duce" wanted to have a free hand to carry out his policies, secure the regime's future in the "post-Mussolini" era, and bring about that "moral reform of the Italians"—without which he was convinced that even the achievement of the first two objectives would be

virtually worthless for the realization of “Italy’s imperial destiny”— it was necessary to accelerate the process of mass fascistization and transform consent into genuine faith. In other words, it was necessary to carry out—to use a modern expression—a “cultural revolution” that, by utilizing all means at the state’s disposal, would achieve, through the permanent mobilization of Italians, their totalitarian education, so as to transform the masses into true fascists and reduce the rest—the unrepentant—to a state of moral isolation such as to deprive them in practice of any direct or indirect influence not only on public life but also on civil society. Until then, Fascist Italy had had a “wonderful orthopedist of the spirit,” the “Duce,” who from time to time had issued “his re-educational prescriptions with the aim of restoring to the Italian character the virile tone indispensable for overcoming the tremendous trials of ‘destiny’”2, now these interventions of “orthopedics of the spirit” were to be systematized, expanded, and made continuous: the entire state—and first and foremost the party—was to commit itself to a “totalitarian educational function”; everything

205 The quoted expressions are taken from the editorial [by C. Costamagna], “Bourgeois Neutrality and the Fascist Transformation of the State,” in *Lo Stato*, December 1938, p. [illegible number]. In Storia e dottrina del Fascismo, op. cit., p. 418, Costamagna (borrowing the expression from M. Manoilesco, Le parti unique, Paris 1936, p. 143) also refers to Mussolini as the “great [illegible word] of the nation.”

206 See, in this regard, G. A. Longo, “The Educational Function of the Party,” *Il «I vii là fascista»*, August 1939, pp. 705 ff., in which, among other things, we read: “What are the main features of this educational function of the Party? It is, first and foremost, political education, in the sense that it aims at shaping the character of the new Italian and the customs of the new, unified Italian people—both inspired, above all, by a desire for civil primacy—and, precisely because of its political nature, it is totalitarian education: in the sense that, directly or indirectly, it addresses the entire Italian people, and in the sense that it encompasses the whole personality of the individual, aiming to bring the spiritual, intellectual, and physical faculties into classical harmony. On the basis of this dual totalitarianism—which presupposes and implies the parallel action of the School—the Party’s educational work (which is not necessarily an explicitly “didactic” endeavor, but which, as a formative endeavor in the fullest and most concrete sense of the word, may also consist simply in the “lived experience” of the Party) also aims, progressively, at selective ends. This selection takes place: a} on a general, and more specifically political, level, in the sense of identifying the individuals who most fully embody the virtues of character inherent in the human ideal of Fascism; b} on a specific, and more specifically technical, level, in the sense of revealing, through an almost entirely experimental process, the particular aptitudes and abilities of each of these individuals.”

The country was to become a great school of ongoing political education that would transform Italians into fully-fledged Fascists, into new men, by changing their habits, their way of life, their mentality, their character, and, if necessary, their physical structure; it was no longer a matter of polemicizing against the “skeptical” and “mandolin-playing” Italian; it was a matter of creating a new type of man—tough, strong, strong-willed, warlike—a sort of modern-day legionary of Caesar, for whom nothing was impossible 207: that “new man” whom all forms of fascism 208 and all totalitarian regimes have sought to create (albeit with different characteristics depending on national traditions and the ideologies of the various movements and regimes), of whom Italian fascism had always spoken and, from the early 1930s onward, with increasing insistence 209, and whom Mussolini had been committed to creating for a decade or more, solemnly declaring: “We will create the new Italian, an Italian who will bear no resemblance to the Italian of yesterday”210. And along with the new man, a new Italian race—no longer “children of slaves,” but “masters,” respected and feared by all211.

We will not dwell on discussing or commenting on such a morally repugnant proposal, which, however, was rooted in the aspiration of any regime operating in a mass society to give participation and consent a real and stable character in relation to its underlying assumptions. Its unfeasibility—especially in the short term—merits only a few words. This—let us be clear—does not, however, in any way rule out (as we shall see in the next chapter) the possibility of its partial realization, limited essentially to a segment of the youth. In a country like Italy, characterized—as we have noted—by vast cultural pluralism and a nationalization of the masses that was only then beginning to take its first concrete steps,212 the only path that could have been pursued to attempt an effective mass politicization was that of a state of political emergency, with the corresponding institutionalization of civil war (ideological and practical) against every type of "enemy," including the "objective" one—that is, the path of a totalitarianism of the Nazi and Stalinist variety. But this was impossible not only because there was no genuine party capable of bringing about such a shift—and the regime had to take into account all its internal balances (not to mention the constraints of the international situation)—even when its political initiatives tended to subvert them—but also and above all because it would have meant calling into question the state-party relationship and, with it, the very conception of the fascist state that Mussolini had come to develop and which he was absolutely unwilling to relinquish. It is more useful to move directly to examining the various ways in which this massive attempt at totalitarian mass education took shape. All the more so because, in doing so, it becomes clear that various initiatives undertaken by fascism in the second half of the 1930s—which are often considered absurd, random, the result of improvisation, spur-of-the-moment suggestions, and slavish imitation of the Nazi model, and therefore —precisely because of their apparent lack of justification—manifestations of the regime's crisis, were not at all such, but, on the contrary, were part of a logic and a program that were, in their own way, rational and organic. A logic and a program that aimed to deal a fatal blow to the "bourgeois mentality" and to put an end to its "corrupting" influence on the people (and, in so doing, to isolate and weaken those essentially anti-fascist bourgeois sectors—especially the productive and intellectual classes—that were most reluctant to accept the evolution of Mussolini's politics), but which also had other, far more ambitious objectives. These were the very same objectives that, as early as 1932, had been clearly set forth in The Doctrine of Fascism, a text that is anything but ornamental (as far too many still insist on considering it today) and which is, instead, the most authentic and reliable key to understanding fascist totalitarianism and its distinctive features. And first and foremost, the objective that summed up all the others and gave them meaning: to create the Nation through the State. In the first part of the Doctrine of Fascism, the section written by G. Gentile, this objective is not only set forth with the utmost clarity, but the entire discourse converges and leads toward it213:

207 Mussolini had told E. Ludwig (see *Conversations with Mussolini*, op. cit., pp. ff.): "If this is not instilled in the people, they fall asleep, and even say simple things that are impossible."

It is not the nation that gives rise to the state, according to the outdated naturalistic concept that served as the basis for the political writings on nation-states in the nineteenth century. On the contrary, the nation—Mussolini, XXXIV, pp. 120 ff.

is created by the state, which gives the people—aware of their own moral unity—a will, and thus an effective existence. A nation's right to independence derives not from a literary and ideal consciousness of its own being, and even less from a more or less unconscious and inert de facto situation, but from an active consciousness, from a political will in action and ready to demonstrate its right: that is, from a sort of State already in the making. The State, in fact, as a universal ethical will, is the creator of law... The Fascist State, the highest and most powerful form of personality, is a force, but a spiritual one. It

encompasses all forms of man's moral and intellectual life. It cannot, therefore, be limited to mere functions of order and protection, as liberalism would have it. It is not a mere mechanism that limits the sphere of so-called individual freedoms. It is an inner form and norm; it is the discipline of the whole person; it penetrates both the will and the intellect. Its principle—the central inspiration of the human personality living within civil society—penetrates deeply and takes root in the heart of the man of action as well as the thinker, the artist as well as the scientist: the soul of the soul.

In short, Fascism is not merely a legislator and founder of institutions, but an educator and promoter of spiritual life. It seeks to remake not the forms of human life, but its content—man himself, his character, and his faith. And to this end, it demands discipline and authority that penetrates deep into the spirit and reigns there unchallenged.

In the second part, which is personally attributable to Mussolini, the discourse is less lucid, but this does not make its meaning or its conclusion any less clear. What gives substance to the State (let us set aside, for the moment, the question of what actually constituted the State—that is, for Gentile214, the "consciousness and will of a few, indeed of One") and thus to its creation of the nation is its function as a great driving force:

The cornerstone of fascist doctrine is the conception of the State, of its essence, its tasks, and its aims… The State, as fascism conceives and implements it, is a spiritual and moral reality, since it embodies the political, legal, and economic organization of the nation, and this organization is, in its emergence and development, a manifestation of the spirit… The State is not only present, but also past and, above all, future. It is the State that transcends the brief limits of individual lives; it represents the immanent consciousness of the nation. The forms in which States express themselves change, but the necessity remains. It is the State that educates citizens in civic virtue, makes them aware of their mission, and urges them toward unity; harmonizes their interests in justice; passes on the achievements of thought in the sciences, the arts, the law, and human solidarity; leads people from the primitive life of the tribe to the highest human expression of power, which is the empire; entrusts to the ages the names of those who died for its integrity or in obedience to its laws; holds up as examples and recommends to future generations the leaders who expanded its territory and the geniuses who illuminated it with glory. When the sense of the State wanes and the dissociative and centrifugal tendencies of individuals or groups prevail, national societies begin to decline.

When the essence and function of the state are put in these terms, one understands the value that fascism had come to hold for Mussolini: that of a sort of secular religion intended to achieve the maximum integration and nationalization of the masses and to transform individuals into so many faithful followers. A secular religion in which the "Duce" was both the "teacher" and the pontiff; a narrow aristocracy (in the Gentile sense) was to constitute a sort of sacred college; the state bureaucracy and the party (transient?) were to serve as the clergy; and a series of myths (in the Sorellian sense) were to represent the truths of faith. The difference from true religions (though the "model," as we shall see, was religion and the Catholic Church) was that these truths of faith were not to be immutable dogmas, but were always in flux, undergoing transformation, depending on political expediency and the far-sighted will of the "Duce." A significant echo of this concern to "convey to ever-wider segments of the people, and in an ever-clearer and more reasoned manner, an awareness of the changing demands of political life and the new directions that the State requires from time to time" is present in the aforementioned article by C. Pellizzi in *Critica fascista* from late 1939. Even more significant, however, is an article published a few months earlier by G. Bottai—certainly the most intelligent and consistent interpreter of Mussolini's totalitarianism among the leaders of the Fascist movement during this period—in *Gerarchia*. In it, we read216:

Human activity can… indeed must transcend doctrine, if the latter is no longer suited to reality. Doctrine itself is a doctrine in motion, subject to the trials of ceaseless revision. Faced with every new problem, every new turning point, one must not turn to tradition to seek a precedent—which cannot be found—but, starting from the full experience of the Regime, provide a new solution suited to the situation. Everything in the history of Fascism is held together and cemented into unity, even in its seemingly contradictory aspects, provided that, in judging its course, we refer to this guiding thread... The Revolution is not a phase of Fascism. It is Fascism itself—a system that lives beyond the conditions that created it and that it created. The revolutionary dynamic has not yet solidified into a static framework... For Mussolini, the revolution "may or may not take the dramatic course that makes an impression," but it acts within the established order as a perpetual force of revision, adjustment, and direction. "It may proceed at a more or less hurried pace." But it is continuous. It demands a willing spirit—alert and vigilant—from the faithful, not from bigots. There is a Mussolini, unknown to the masses, in whose spirit the Revolution ceaselessly elaborates its formulas. Faced with every new problem, his initiative is ready with a new solution, suited to the situation. Hence his timing, which is not opportunism but the historical sense in action of a revolutionary, who acts all the more profoundly the further he moves away from conventional methods of reform.

Given this value attributed to the State, it is easy to understand that the anti-bourgeois struggle constituted, as has been said, only a moment, an aspect of a far vaster and more ambitious mass educational campaign.

Early fascism had been anti-bourgeois; those fascists who came from socialism, from left-wing subversion—the Futurists, the Arditi—were also anti-bourgeois, albeit in different ways. As Fascism developed from the end of the 1920s onward—thanks above all to the support and sympathies of the petty and middle bourgeoisie—the anti-bourgeois polemic had subsided and then nearly died down, but, at its core, it remained a characteristic of the mentality and culture of many Fascists, often taking on populist tones among certain intellectuals.[217] The position of Pietro Gorgolini can be considered typical. In his book *Fascism in Italian Life*, written in 1921, published in the spring of the following year with a flattering preface by Mussolini ("the best publication on fascism among all those that have appeared in Italy from March 1919 to the present"), and republished several times during the first decade of Fascist rule, he wrote:218

Fascism... cannot be, is not, and will never be on the side of the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it often enters the fray against it. Relentlessly. The reasons for this unyielding hostility are endless: political, social, moral, economic, legal, national...

The Matteotti crisis, by reigniting intransigence, had also revived anti-bourgeois polemics; with the exception of sporadic cases, however, these polemics were directed primarily against the upper middle class and the world of finance, which were accused of having first "stood on the sidelines" and then opposed fascism.[219] Once the crisis subsided, however, the polemics also died down. This does not mean that its roots had withered away. On the contrary, they were still very much alive not only among the old fascists—those of the very first hour 220—but also among the

For the meaning in which we use the term "populism," see the relevant entry by L. Incisa in the *Dizionario di politica*, edited by N. Bobbio and N. Matteucci, Turin 1976, pp. 762 ff.; as well as N. Matteucci, *From Populism to the Historic Compromise*, Rome 1976, passim and esp. pp. 47 ff.

220 A highly interesting account—at once political, psychological, and literary—of the persistence

among old-guard fascists of an anti-bourgeois spirit and of the frustrations they felt upon realizing that the bourgeoisie had, in fact, been strengthened by fascism is provided by the works of Marcello

young people and, in particular, among the intellectuals of the new generation, who saw the bourgeoisie as the greatest psychological, cultural, and social obstacle to the realization of the true “Fascist order”—the oft-heralded but never-achieved “social transformation” of Fascism. An examination of the youth press and minor fascist publications of the late 1920s and the first half of the 1930s—that is, the period in which, to quote G. Volpe221, there were “quite a few” who believed that fascism “increasingly presents itself as a means of implementing socialism”—is highly significant. In fact, it reveals a widespread anti-bourgeois sentiment with populist undertones, which attributed all evils to the bourgeoisie—ranging from having, in the past, miseducated the people and pursued a politics devoid of any spirituality and thus arid and barren, to, in the present, of holding back the regime’s momentum through its “passive participation,” while further contaminating—with its narrow-mindedness and lack of both social spirit and a sense of the state—a large part of the old fascist generation and even part of the new one. Two quotations, among the many that could be cited, seem to us to capture this state of mind well. The first, from an article by Bruno Spampanato 222, is particularly revealing for understanding what these fascists meant by “bourgeois mentality”:

Scratch the surface of these bourgeois a little, and they reveal what they truly are: people of conventional faith, optimistic, easily satisfied, just short-sighted enough, compromising with comfort, convention, and mediocrity—in short, lovers of a quiet life of vague philosophical inspiration but bordering on the most characteristic and authentic cowardice.

No compromise is too great. No reservation is sufficient. No useful impulse. In every age and every country, their morality was tailored to their feet like shoes: and to renew it, all that was needed was to polish it up. The Italian bourgeois, like the rest.

Let us not say that he did not cultivate virtues, but their classical flavor prompted him to admire them in books, and if he ever discussed them, he adopted that saccharine and bombastic rhetorical tone that is enough to kill a hundred and one virtues.

The bourgeoisie was—and is—more of a climate than a class. More than a climate, it is the colossal weight of the Third Estate’s achievements, quietly ruminated upon and digested over several generations.

The second, from an article by Luigi Fontanelli, has a more political significance:

Gallian. See P. Buchignani, “Primitivism and Anti-Bourgeoisism in the Fiction of Marcello Gallian,” in *Trimestre*, July–December 1979, pp. 311 ff.

222 The article, titled “The Other Anti-Fascism,” was reprinted in the volume *Spampanato*, *Polemica ai margini*, Milan 1935, pp. 123 ff., of which one can also consult the preliminary note and, in particular, p. ix.

In the aftermath of the March on Rome, those who viewed the event with bourgeois satisfaction coined the term “coup d’état.” Indeed, the bourgeoisie could not see beyond the coup d’état or military dictatorship: these were its myths, the ones that would prevail over the corresponding myths of Italian revolutionary socialism...

By supporting Fascism for the sake of the “coup d’état,” the bourgeoisie had indeed intended to wage a decisive battle and win it. In fact, it had reached the very limits of its own horizons. But the horizons of Fascism are not those of the bourgeoisie, because they are not those of the past, just as the spirit of Fascism is the antithesis of the bourgeois spirit.

Mussolini had been anti-bourgeois and, in essence, had remained so. As Aquarone 224 rightly wrote, “an instinctive, plebeian aversion to the bourgeoisie—timid and philistine, incapable, in its narrow-minded selfishness, of feeling deeply or acting decisively”—had always remained alive in him. With the difference, however, that his polemic against the bourgeoisie had remained, throughout the entire African War, within very cautious bounds, generally manifesting itself indirectly, by contrast, through the exaltation of the Fascist mentality, “style,” and “mystique,” and the denunciation of the “evils” that, in his view, afflicted the countries where the “decadent” bourgeoisie celebrated its cultural and political “triumphs”—first and foremost, that of demographic decline. In a certain sense, one might even say that he had become increasingly so as it became evident to him just how superficial—and, deep down, far from irreversible, tinged with manifold grievances; and that the upper middle class—while reaping undoubted benefits from fascism and professing the utmost loyalty to it—always proved “insensitive” to the regime’s “higher” demands and never missed an opportunity to derive the maximum benefit from any “sacrifice.” The resistance and discontent sparked first by the “quota ninety” policy and then by the measures to address the economic crisis had, in this regard, carried considerable weight. Among the various accounts that could be cited, this excerpt from Dino Grandi’s diary, dated December 18, 1930, serves as a representative example:

The Duce is outraged at the Italian bourgeoisie. “The Italian bourgeois who owns three cars—one for himself, one for his wife, and one for his mistress—and is forced to reduce those three cars to two (his wife’s is the first to be sacrificed) complains and screams that ‘we’re ruined’ and that ‘we can’t go on like this.’” How right the President is.

Yet in fifteen years in power, Mussolini’s most “explicit” public “attack” on the bourgeoisie had been this one, delivered on March 18, 1934, at the regime’s second five-year assembly 225:

The Fascist people of Italy, to whom I point out these great, long-standing guiding principles, are today fully united behind Fascism and will demonstrate this on Sunday with their plebiscite. Anti-Fascism is over. Its last gasps have been identified and are becoming increasingly sporadic. Traitors, loudmouths, and cowards will be eliminated without mercy. Yet one danger may still threaten the regime: this danger may be represented by what is commonly called the “bourgeois spirit”—that is, a spirit of complacency and conformity, a tendency toward skepticism, compromise, a life of comfort, and careerism. The bourgeoisified fascist is the one who believes that there is nothing left to do, that enthusiasm is a nuisance, that there are too many parades, that it is time to settle down, that one child is enough, and that the comfort of home is the supreme priority. I do not rule out the existence of bourgeois temperaments, but I deny that they can be fascists. The creed of the fascist is heroism; that of the bourgeois is selfishness.

There is but one remedy against this danger: the principle of continuous revolution. This principle must be entrusted to the young—both in years and in spirit. It drives away the intellectually complacent, keeps the people’s interest ever alive: it does not immobilize history, but develops its forces. In our view, revolution is a process that alternates the drudgery of daily construction with dazzling moments of sacrifice and glory. Amid this turmoil following the war, it is already possible to see—and will become increasingly evident—the physical and moral transformation of the Italian people. Thus begins the fourth great historical era of the Italian people, one that future historians will call the era of the

Black Shirts. This era will see the true Fascists—that is, those born, raised, and having lived entirely within our cultural milieu—endowed with those virtues that grant peoples the privilege of global primacy.

A speech, as can be seen, that is typically Mussolinian, still entirely focused on the "long term" and in which any political-social characterization of the anti-bourgeois polemic was absent (though it was present in fascists such as Fontanelli); moreover, it was framed in such general terms that one could never have imagined that within four years it would take on such different tones and become the central issue of fascist domestic politics.

And in fact, to understand the drastic surge in anti-bourgeois sentiment in 1938–39, these precedents must be kept firmly in mind; however, it must be clear that their relationship to that surge was merely to provide the necessary groundwork for making it popular in certain Fascist circles and for mobilizing them, but that, for the rest, anti-bourgeois policy arose in a context determined exclusively by the regime's situation and by Mussolini's politics at that moment. In other words, it is unthinkable to consider the "ideological" motivation as anything other than subordinate to the political one.

The same applies to the "social" motivation. With the war in Africa, many fascists of the younger generations (though not exclusively them 226) had seen their expectations and demands for a "social turning point" reignited. This was all the more true since Fascist youth and the Italian people as a whole seemed to have passed the test—the "examination"—of the war with flying colors.[227] It is more than likely that Mussolini had to, and ultimately wanted to, take the aspirations of Fascist youth into account. His background, his upbringing, his mindset, his experience in government, his ambitions, as well as his political interests—in short, everything—pushed him in this direction. Aside from the fact that his "spiritualism" led him to consider "moral reform" more urgent and preliminary than "material" reform, at that moment, however, he could not conceive of a true "social turnaround." Such a shift would, in fact, have created too many internal difficulties for him and, above all—even if, hypothetically, he had managed to overcome these difficulties—it would have forced him into a period of internal "retreat" and, therefore, would have "clipped his wings" on the international stage at a time that was objectively very difficult. Hence the need for him not to ignore social demands and expectations, but to once again defer their realization over time, linking them, moreover, to the anti-bourgeois struggle so as to harness the "social momentum" of the younger generations in service of that cause. Significant in this regard is the hierarchy of objectives to be achieved that he outlined—as he had done three years earlier 228—on March 26, 1939, speaking to the squad members gathered in Rome to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Fasci di combattimento 229:

the man of the squads tells the one lingering behind the shutters that the revolution is not over, but from the standpoint of customs, character, and social distances, it has barely begun.

And even more significant, as evidence of how he conceived and waged the battle against the bourgeoisie—firmly convinced that it was a battle intended to affect not so much the social distances between the various classes as the customs and character of the bourgeoisie2W—is the

227 A typical example of how quite a few young Fascists had understood and experienced the war in Africa as a test for themselves and for Italians—one that was, moreover, meant to continue and find validation in the postwar period—is provided by I. Montanelli, "Dopo la guerra," in *Civiltà fascista*, May 1936, pp. 290 ff.

230 It is significant that even when speaking with his closest collaborators, Mussolini—while making

no secret whatsoever of his state of mind and his judgment of the bourgeoisie and announcing his decision to correct it “with kicks to the shins”—never mentioned any intention of extending his action to the economic and social sphere. At most, as Ciano noted (July 10, 1938), he spoke “of a third wave, to be carried out in October, relying particularly on the working-class and peasant masses,” but the entire context of the speech rules out the possibility that the reference to the working-class and peasant masses was “semi-secret” (“this speech is intended to remain unpublished for the time being; but I authorize you to transmit it for oral dissemination”) delivered by him five months earlier, on October 25, 1938, to the National Council of the PNF; a speech to which we must return because it is fundamental for understanding the very close connection that bound together, around the common denominator of the anti-bourgeois struggle, a whole series of initiatives231:

At the end of Year XVI, I identified an enemy—an enemy of our regime. This enemy is called the “bourgeoisie.”

When, a few years ago, I was dealing with this matter and trying, in vain, to set the dogs straight, I used to say: make a very clear distinction between capitalism and the bourgeoisie. Because the bourgeoisie may be an economic category, but it is above all a moral category; it is a state of mind, a temperament. It is a mentality that is utterly at odds with the fascist mentality. One could say, roughly speaking, that the bourgeoisie is the group situated between the workers on one side and the peasants on the other—that is, among several million people. This does not satisfy us. The bourgeoisie is a category of a political-moral nature.

What needed to be fought against and transformed in the bourgeoisie was not its social influence, but its temperament and its morality—that is, its narrow-mindedness, its pessimism, its petty and limited vision, its pacifism, its pietism, its inferiority complex toward other peoples, and its lack of passion for great goals:

The bourgeoisie is a category of a political-moral nature. How shall we identify it? Through examples. Example: one day in July, Prince Colonna takes flight and falls. The natural-born fascist says: “But this Roman prince, from a great, truly great family, has guts. His act is admirable. He could have spent the afternoon on Via Veneto exchanging idle chatter with other people, but instead, he took to the skies.” The bourgeois comment: “But what made him do that?”

Transoceanic flights are undertaken that carry our air force to distant continents. The fascist people are proud of this. They see in these feats something that fills the Italian people with pride. They see an increase in the nation’s moral prestige. The bourgeois sits down at the table and says: “Three engines, three aircraft, nine engines. Fuel consumption per engine: five hundred liters. So this costs us between fifteen and twenty million.” This is typical bourgeois reasoning. Another defining characteristic of the bourgeoisie, of the bourgeois mentality: a love of foreign things. “Paris! But anyone who hasn’t been to Paris doesn’t know the world—he’s no man!” And they even roll their “r”s. “London! It rules a quarter of the continents.”

According to them, Italy is a small, poor country that must take lessons from French democracy and British aristocracy, because it must always copy someone or something.

Another characteristic trait of the bourgeoisie: its pessimism, a far cry from our virile pessimism—which is the kind of pessimism that sees the obstacle but does not devalue it—other than as a moral condemnation of the “exhausted and defeatist” bourgeoisie in the eyes of the working classes. See G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 106 and 156.

and is determined to face it. The pessimism of the bourgeois is that which wraps its head in bandages before it has even been broken. Before anything happens, it says: “But what is going to happen? We are lost; it is a leap into the unknown.”

But then again, the bourgeois is a nitpicker when it comes to so-called great men. The bourgeois’s delight is in seeing that Napoleon, at a certain moment in *Maria Waleska*, is wearing a sort of ill-defined dressing gown and shaving. Then the bourgeois says: “See, he’s just like me.” In fact, he is just like him. Napoleon didn’t go to bed wearing spurs and boots. But there is one thing the bourgeois will never be able to do. He will never be able to win a battle like the Battle of Austerlitz. Evidently, there is something in Napoleon that is common to all men, but there is also something profoundly different. The bourgeois is the enemy of sports. A bitter enemy of sports, of anything that might disturb his perpetual state of tranquility. He is naturally pacifist, compassionate, pietistic, quick to be moved, always humanitarian, and unproductive. Unproductive, because the bourgeois calculates everything. If on a Saturday evening he begins to discuss with his wife whether or not to have a child, his calculation tells him that it is not in his best interest, that it is better not to. Whereas, on the other hand, fertility is a matter of instinct. Excessive rational thought is hostile to the primordial, irrepressible, and profound forms of humanity.

These are the characteristic physical traits of the bourgeois 232.

Having clearly highlighted this point, it must also be said that, given the importance they attributed to “moral reform,” the significance they ascribed to the anti-bourgeois struggle in order to achieve it, and the meager and essentially counterproductive results that this struggle immediately proved to yield outside of limited youth circles, Mussolini—and with him Starace, that is, the party—did almost nothing to prevent those Fascists, especially the young ones, who advocated a “social turnaround,” from giving the anti-bourgeois polemic a character that often went beyond the limits the “Duce” had set. A careful reading of *Il popolo d’Italia* and *Gerarchia* is indicative of this. The most politically and socially vigorous attacks on the bourgeoisie appeared in 1938–39 in the GUF press and, albeit less frequently, in the labor union press. Apart from these publications, among the most authoritative Fascist organs, it can be said that none engaged in anti-bourgeois polemics as much as the two (and especially *Gerarchia*) that reported directly to Mussolini 233 and published numerous attacks that went beyond “moral” and social issues, while taking no stance that could be considered even slightly critical 234. Even “Critica fascista,” which was one of the most active in this regard, proved to be more cautious, managing to keep extremist stances to a minimum and publishing a few critical or, at least, cautionary articles 235. It is certainly not without significance that among the anti-bourgeois polemical books published between 1939 and 1941 236, the most violent and the one richest in attacks not limited to the mere moral aspect of the bourgeoisie—and which, precisely for this reason, made the greatest impression and aroused the greatest indignation 237— *Processo alla borghesia*, was largely a collection of writings that had previously appeared in *Gerarchia* and *Il popolo d’Italia*, read and approved by Mussolini 238.

233 The articles that appeared in *Il popolo d’Italia* were only exceptionally read in advance by Mussolini, and the actual responsibility for them lay with G. Pini, who would sometimes summarize the most important ones for him over the phone to obtain his approval. See G. Pini, *Filo diretto con Palazzo Venezia*, op. cit., passim. As for those intended for *Gerarchia*, however, Mussolini was in the habit of always reading the drafts. See N. Tripodi, *Italia fascista in piedi! Memorie di un lettore*, Rome 1972, p. 147.

234 In addition to a column of statements by young people on the “bourgeois mentality and the fascist spirit” titled *L’antiborghese*, published from February to August 1939, the most significant writings that appeared in *Gerarchia* were, in September 1938, M. Puccini, “Incidere sul costume,” and in 1939: O. Valle, “Three Faces of the Anti-Bourgeoisie” (January); “Clarifications for the ‘Bourgeois’” (February); G. Calza, “Fascism and the Bourgeoisie: The End of Money as Master” (March); R. Pavese, “Gold, an Ignoble Metal” (April); E. Sulis, “Civilization and New Men” (May); T. Madia, “Connotations” (June); B. Ricci, “Mentality and Class” (July).

The anti-bourgeois polemic constituted the spearhead of the Fascist “cultural revolution,” which in turn encapsulated much of the “totalitarian turn” of the second half of the 1930s. In fact, on closer inspection, it was the more or less explicit driving force behind all the initiatives undertaken within this framework at every level and with an unprecedented deployment of propaganda resources.

Let us begin with what Mussolini, in his “semi-secret” speech of October 25, 1938, described as “powerful punches to the gut” delivered “in the sixteenth year of the regime” to the Italian bourgeoisie.

235 Among the positions taken by *Critica fascista* opposing the extremes of the anti-bourgeois polemic, see Il Guardiano, “Fascism and the Bourgeoisie” (January 15, 1939, in response to an article by F. Bernardini in *L’assalto*); as well as B. Romani, “The Discovery of the Classes” (February 15, 1939), in response to the populism of certain attacks: “Certain characteristics of the working and agricultural classes are exalted for rhetorical and propagandistic reasons; to what extent they actually correspond to the life and customs of these classes is a matter that remains to be clarified.”

The most explicit criticism published by Bottai’s journal, however, was the article by C. Pellizzi, “Borghese” and the Bourgeoisie (September 1, 1938). Pellizzi (whose first article in the *Corriere della Sera* on July 21 had drawn much criticism, including that of *Piccola Guardia* in its August 15 issue) asserted that, since fascism sought to eliminate “the social pariah of the proletariat” and “the supercapitalist,” “its aim, therefore, is not to reduce, but rather to extend as much as possible, on new ethical and legal foundations, the ethical and social phenomenon of the small and middle bourgeoisie.” And he consequently cautioned: “In tackling certain vices that might be better defined otherwise, let us be careful not to offend what, on the contrary, needs to be encouraged. It seems to me that Italy is in dire need of good bourgeois, even with all the aesthetic and moral limitations that such a social status entails.”

Among other interesting positions is Erba’s “Fascism and the Bourgeoisie” (January 15, 1939), in which he accuses the nationalists of having diverted Fascism—once it had come to power—from its original non-bourgeois premises.

236 Among these, see in particular 1. de Begnac, *Itinerario della borghesia*, Brescia 1940, and S. Gatto, *Il borghese*, Milan 1941 (a booklet of the School of Fascist Mysticism S. I. Mussolini). For the development of the anti-bourgeois polemic during the war years, see C. Scorza, *Tipi... tipi... tipi...*, Florence 1942.

238 *Processo alla borghesia*, edited by E. Sulis, Rome 1939. In this volume (which went through three editions in four months), particular attention should be paid to the contributions by Sulis himself (in which italics indicate the underlinings made by Mussolini while reading the manuscript), by B. Ricci (who was most committed to giving the anti-bourgeois polemic a distinctly social perspective and to a real narrowing of “distances”), and by R. Pavese.

First, the abolition of the formal “lei” (“servile, foreign, and detested by the great Italians, from Leopardi to Cavour,” 239) and its replacement with “voi,” and, more generally, the campaign for the purity of the Italian language and, therefore, against the use of foreign terms and expressions (whether directly borrowed or Italianized) and dialects. Of all these, the “anti-lei battle,” while certainly not achieving total success, was probably the most successful. This was partly because the use of “lei” was not widespread in some regions, partly because conforming to it was an act of discipline without negative consequences and resisting it was difficult, and partly because a significant number of writers and intellectuals—who “shaped public opinion” in many circles—sided with it, whether out of conformism or genuine conviction, philologists such as Pasquali; writers and critics such as Marinetti, Bargellini, Baldini, Landolfi, Quasimodo, Savinio, Pratolini, Vittorini, Negri, Vivanti, Morante, Anceschi, Migliorini, and Binni; philosophers such as Carlini and Orestano; and historians such as Volpe 240.

Second: the introduction of the “Roman march.” Mussolini insisted on this very strongly, both in private (attributing, among other things, the king’s hostility toward the new parade march to the fact that “being physically a half-wit,” “he cannot perform it without looking ridiculous”241) and in public.

“The first blow was the Roman parade step,” he said on October 25, 1938.[242] “The people now adore it. But the bourgeoisie detested it. They said, ‘But what is this Roman parade step?’ They didn’t know that it was invented by Eugenio of Savoy and adopted by all armies.” It was said that it was undemocratic and had therefore been abolished, whereas we have reinstated it. It was also said that it is the same as the “goose step.” First of all, that is not true. Second, even if it were true, there is a curious fact: that the Italian people are perhaps the only people on earth who have the goose in their history. In fact, all historians of Rome attest to this. There was a Roman encampment on the Capitoline Hill. Now, the goose stood guard better than dogs. Moreover, the goose was dedicated to Juno, and was therefore a highly respectable animal; and it is perfectly normal that the goose would have roused the Romans—who were perhaps tired and asleep—and thus enabled the consul to defeat the Gauls (today’s French) and prevent them from climbing to the summit of the Capitoline Hill. Everyone who has seen our parade step and the Germanic parade step has noted that there is a fundamental difference. All armies have adopted it—including the British, the Albanians, and the Bulgarians; even the soldiers of the Argentine Republic and the cadets of the United States. Evidently, at a certain moment, one must convey an impression of strength.

What I am telling you is decisive and serious: why wasn’t the parade step performed before? Because it was believed that we were incapable of doing it. In fact, it was said: “It is a giant’s stride and cannot be the stride of a people where everyone is small and crippled.” There was almost an acknowledgment of our physical inferiority in our refusal to demonstrate this strength of ours. The people sensed it. The bourgeoisie took offense. But after my remarks on February 1, in which I cast a harsh light on the bourgeoisie, calling them sedentary, half-baked, and other such things, the bourgeoisie quieted down.

That march expresses our will. Anyone is capable of marching in step. If you take a flock of three thousand sheep with bells, all the bells ring at the same time and the flock marches in step. Can we be satisfied with this? No. The introduction of the Roman march has had repercussions throughout the world as an expression of moral strength. We will maintain it precisely because it embodies these characteristics.

We have included this excerpt from Mussolini’s oratory because, if one looks beyond its theatrical

elements, it clearly illustrates the goal the “Duce” sought to achieve through the introduction of the “Roman step” and through other similar initiatives he adopted during the same period—such as, for example, the one requiring government employees to wear uniforms with rank insignia, just like the military 243: to influence customs and character by creating a military-style atmosphere around Italians and making them live as much as possible “ready for battle.” This is neither more nor less than what is stated in the third preface to the proceedings of the Grand Council, which he wrote on July 1, 1938, as a summary of the past five years and to indicate the central role that the reform of customs was to play in the further development of the “Fascist revolution” 244:

The entire atmosphere in which the life of the Italian people unfolds is military in character; it must have—and will have—an increasingly military character: the people take pride in knowing that they are permanently mobilized for both the work of peace and that of war.

The third initiative, the third “powerful punch to the gut of the bourgeoisie”: the “racial question.” With this, the discourse becomes more complex, and the consequences take on a far greater scope. By the time Mussolini delivered his “semi-secret” speech, this initiative had already begun to transform, moving from its original phase—the formation of a “racial consciousness”—to a second phase, which essentially revolved around anti-Semitism and would very soon lead to the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation.

243 According to G. Bottai, *Diario* (ff. 587 ff., dated August 19, 1938), Mussolini reportedly justified the introduction of uniforms for civil servants (which entailed a cost of three hundred million) as follows: “Uniforms for civil servants are the reform of the bureaucracy. Remember this: ‘Clothes make the man.’” Nevertheless, his words fairly well convey the motives and significance that this initiative held for Mussolini at the outset—that is, before a series of considerations, primarily related to foreign policy, led him to broaden the scope of the “racial question” and to bring to the forefront motivations different from the original ones. It is important to make this clear, because the first phase of the “racial question” must be viewed within the framework of what we have defined as Mussolini’s “cultural revolution” of the second half of the 1930s, whereas the second phase—despite following so closely on the heels of the first as to be almost indistinguishable from it—must be placed in an entirely different context —so much so that, even in our own exposition, we will address it in another section of this volume—even though various parties, and Mussolini himself, significantly sought to bring it as well into the “spiritualist” framework of “racial consciousness” to be instilled in Italians. Regarding the “racial question,” in the sense that concerns us here, Mussolini said 245:

The racial issue is, for me, an extremely important achievement, and it is extremely important to have introduced it into the history of Italy. The ancient Romans were racists to an unbelievable degree. The great struggle of the Roman Republic was precisely this: to determine whether the Roman race could unite with other races.

This racist principle, introduced for the first time in the history of the Italian people, is of incalculable importance, because, here too, we were faced with an inferiority complex. Here, too, we had convinced ourselves that we are not a single people, but a mixture of races, which is why there was reason to say, in the United States: “There are two races in Italy: that of the Po Valley and that of the South.” Such distinctions were made in certificates, attestations, and so on.

We must bear in mind that we are not Hamites, that we are not Semites, that we are not Mongols. And so, if we are none of these races, we are evidently Aryans and we came from the Alps, from the north. Therefore, we are pure Mediterranean-type Aryans. The barbarian invasions following the fall of the

Roman Empire involved only a small number of people: the Lombards numbered no more than eight thousand and were assimilated; within fifty years, they were speaking Latin.

Without going back to our origins—to the Ligurians and the five or six thousand years before Christ—we'll simply say that, for at least fifteen hundred years, our people have intermarried among themselves, which is why their race is pure, especially in the countryside. Naturally, when a people becomes aware of its own race, it compares it to all races, not just one. We had become aware of it only in relation to the Hamites, that is, the Africans. The lack of racial dignity had very serious consequences among the Amhara. It was one of the causes of the Amhara uprising. The Amhara had no desire to rebel against Italian rule, nor any interest in doing so. This is proven by the fact that during the Ethiopian campaign, five thousand heavily armed Amhara welcomed Comrade Starace—when he stepped off the airplane—with displays of obedience and enthusiasm. But when they saw Italians who were even more ragged than they were, who lived in tuculs, who abducted their women, and so on, they said, "This is not a race that brings civilization." And since the Amhara are the most aristocratic race in Ethiopia, they rebelled.

Catholics probably don't know these things, but we do. That is why the empire's racial laws will be strictly enforced, and all those who violate them will be expelled, punished, or imprisoned. For the empire to endure, the natives must hold a crystal-clear, predominant belief in our superiority.

As can be seen, the motivations here were the same as always. In addition to the "external" one—changing the image Italians had abroad—they were to bring unity to the nation by eliminating the "racial" differences between the North and the South, and to bestow upon Italians a "racial dignity" both in relation to other European peoples (helping them overcome any "inferiority complex" toward them) and toward the indigenous populations of the colonies. It is impossible to rank these motivations or these objectives. This is all the more true given that, in this early phase, the "racial question" had boundaries that were difficult for Mussolini to define and often ended up becoming conflated with demographic issues, health concerns (especially regarding motherhood and young people), competitive sports, and the physical improvement of the younger generations. What is certain is that the news reaching him from Ethiopia played a significant role in prompting Mussolini to frame the issue of "dignity" in racial terms rather than national ones, as had been the case in the past. The references to the ongoing rebellion in that country and to the behavior of Italians toward the indigenous populations were not mere pretexts used to bolster his decision and justify it. Various accounts attest to the profound impression that such news had made on him 246, to the point of leading him to believe that the cause of the rebellions was essentially attributable to the behavior of the Italians, to their lack of "racial dignity," and, therefore, to their inability to establish a "proper" relationship—as conquerors and civilizers, superior, and thus in every respect superior to the natives—with the local populations.

246 Mussolini was deeply impressed by what R. Farinacci wrote to him on April 24, 1938, upon his return from a trip to Ethiopia: "The nationals are not kept under strict supervision, and thus present a less-than-imperial spectacle to the natives. There are numerous incidents caused by their vulgar, disgusting, or offensive behavior. Here is a list of some of the most serious shortcomings reported:

a) a complete lack of understanding and respect for the customs and traditions of the local populations;

b) appalling behavior on the part of civilian and military Italians toward indigenous women; c) requests for loans from wealthy indigenous people;

d) a boorish manner of living and dressing that stands in stark contrast to the way the indigenous people

behave and dress, etc."

ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence (1922–1943), 242/R, file "R. Farinacci," subfile 39.

Ciano's diary contains two significant entries on this subject. One dated January 8, 1938, 247:

The Duce was concerned about the Empire: the Goggiam are in revolt. According to the Duce, Pirzio Biroli is responsible for this, as is the racial unpreparedness of the Italians. The conduct of many of our people has caused the natives to lose respect for the white race.

The other entry is dated July 30 of that year 248:

...the Duce considers the racial question to be fundamental following the conquest of the Empire. It is the racial unpreparedness of the Italians that has led to the Amhara uprising.

These were the three initiatives Mussolini discussed in his "semi-secret" speech to the National Council of the PNF. Nothing, however, would be more mistaken than to believe that the anti-bourgeois struggle and, more generally, the Fascist "cultural revolution"—of which the anti-bourgeois struggle was but one aspect, one moment—were limited to these. To gain an adequate understanding of their scope, one must also consider other initiatives that were not explicitly linked to them and bear in mind their influence on propaganda initiatives and themes that had long been on the agenda but which, in the second half of the 1930s, altered or accentuated their ideological character in an anti-bourgeois direction (a typical example in this regard is the demographic campaign and the campaign against celibacy 249) and, more generally, on the further intensification and widespread implementation of control over and the politicization of information and mass culture at all levels.

249 The Grand Council's meeting on March 3, 1937, was devoted to the demographic issue. After hearing a report by Bottai, the supreme body of Fascism established a series of directives, which were transformed in the following months into laws aimed at promoting demographic growth (marriage loans, priority in hiring, and career and tax benefits for fathers of large families), to discourage celibacy (extension of taxation to new categories of unmarried men), and to keep the country's demographic situation under constant control (establishment of the Central Demographic Office, transformed in September 1938 into the General Directorate for Demography and Race). See PNF, *The Grand Council of Fascism*, etc., op. cit., pp. 622 ff.

The predictions and fears circulating on the eve of the Grand Council session—which was known to be addressing the demographic issue—are highly indicative of the mood shaped by the anti-bourgeois polemic (which, after all, was only just beginning). The main reason for these fears (which a note preserved among Mussolini's papers described as "serious apprehension and, in many cases, genuine panic") was a number of rumors and proposals that had appeared in party publications regarding measures that would authorize the state to confiscate large portions of the estates of those who died childless or, indeed, the introduction of a tax inversely proportional to the number of children, ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence (1922–1943), 242/R, "Grand Council," subfolder 15 (1937), ins. A. A. De Stefani had argued against this type of proposal in the preceding months, highlighting the damage it would cause to the national economy and warning that "the solution to the demographic problem cannot be achieved by making the rich poor and the poor rich, but by creating a legal norm accompanied by adequate civil sanctions." In this regard, De Stefani observed that "Fascist legislation is still, when it comes to marriage and parentage, a thoroughly liberal one."

The incentives and benefits established for those who married and had children were not enough to strip it of this character. “All of these,” she wrote, “are mere stopgap measures unless the issue of the legal obligation of marriage and parentage is addressed.” A measure along these lines could have been to deny “full rights to those who do not guarantee the stability and growth of the population.” See the two articles in question in A. de Stefani, *Commenti e discorsi*, Bologna 1938, p. 203.

The role of radio during the Fascist era (on the eve of the Ethiopian War, there were just over half a million subscribers; in 1937, about 300,000 more; and by the end of 1939, nearly 1.2 million, more than half of whom were located in the North) has recently been the subject of various studies. These studies—and especially the best among them, those by A. Monticene 250—clearly demonstrate both the growing importance that the regime attributed to radio broadcasts with the war in Ethiopia (by 1937, spoken-word programs outnumbered musical ones, which had previously predominated), as well as their gradual politicization (Monticene astutely observes that during the period under consideration here, “the regime no longer merely uses the radio for propaganda; it uses it to conduct politics”251), and how, despite this, certain types of political and cultural broadcasts maintained an overall high standard between 1937 and 1940. It is therefore not necessary to dwell on this role, especially since, as the EIAR was strictly and directly controlled by the regime, its political management posed no problems, as it could be adapted at any time to the regime’s tactical and strategic needs.

The same can be said for the more immediately political aspect—the LUCE newsreels—of the use of film as a medium, which was also directly in the hands of the regime and almost always personally reviewed in advance by Mussolini 252.

The situation is more complex when it comes to entertainment cinema, or narrative films.[253] Openly fascist films were, in fact, very few compared to the national film output as a whole, which was instead characterized by light-hearted, “escapist” subjects—especially lighthearted comedies (the famous “telefoni bianchi”) and period pieces. It should also be noted that it was primarily during the second half of the 1930s that the majority of politically engaged films were produced and—more importantly—the regime implemented a genuine film policy regarding both infrastructure (the Experimental Center for Cinematography began operations in 1935, and Cinecittà was inaugurated in 1937) as well as the direction and control of national production and the importation of foreign films (the Foreign Film Monopoly was created in *38) by the General Directorate for Cinematography, established in September 1934 under the Undersecretariat for the Press and Propaganda and headed for five years (nearly the entire period of interest here) by Luigi Freddi. A longtime fascist (he had previously been in charge of the Propaganda Office of the National Fascist Party and the Fasci abroad), endowed with remarkable skills and technical expertise, Freddi 254, despite having to take into account a series of often conflicting demands—primarily those of the industry, public taste, and foreign “competition”—managed to make cinema a far more coherent and, despite everything, functional element of the fascist “education” of the masses than is generally claimed. Not wishing to create a state-run film industry, unwilling and unable to completely block the importation of foreign films, and considering a national production overly committed to overt propaganda to be economically and politically counterproductive, the only path forward was to guide and control production and imports in such a way as to ensure that only films devoid of critical content—or, worse, alternative to the Italian reality of the time (that is, films that did not contradict, as was stated, 255 “the life around us”) and that did not encourage desires unattainable within the context of that reality and, if possible, that—by presenting certain models of life—could serve a function of social and cultural integration. In this sense, the decision to prioritize American productions with regard to imports is significant: except in exceptional cases (which were handled by the censorship authorities), the values and morals that characterized these productions were, in fact, closer to those that Fascism accepted or even advocated than to those that were very often

present in other productions, particularly French ones. Even more significant is the fact that in September 1936, Vittorio Mussolini went so far as to identify American cinema as the model that Italian cinema should emulate 256:

253 Cinema during the Fascist era has been the subject of numerous studies; among the most useful, see F. Savio [F. Pavolini], *Ma l'amore no. Realismo, formalismo, propaganda e telefoni bianchi nel cinema italiano di regime (1950–1943)*, Milan 1975; id., *Cinecittà anni trenta*, 3 vols., Rome 1979; G. P. Brunetta, Intellectuals, Cinema, and Propaganda Between the Two Wars. Fascism and Film Policy, Milan 1973; id., History of Italian Cinema, Rome 1979, pp. 221 ff.; M. Argentieri, The Eye of the Regime. Information and Propaganda in Fascist Cinema, Florence 1979; J. A. Gili, The Fascist State and Cinema: Repression and Promotion, Rome 1981; P. V. Cannistraro, *The Consensus Factory*, op. cit., pp. 273 ff.

America is young while Europe is ancient, and this situation affects their respective audiences, even in the realm of simple entertainment.

Fortunately for us, under Fascism, Italy stands apart and is immune to any pernicious trends: thus, the ground is more conducive to a broad movement for cinematic reform and autonomy.

Is it perhaps heresy to assert that the spirit, mentality, and temperament of Italian youth—despite the logical and natural differences inherent in a different race—are much closer to those of youth across the ocean than to those of Russian, German, French, or Spanish youth?

After all, the American audience loves films with broad horizons, feels the weight of vast issues, and is drawn to the childlike yet joyful sense of adventure; and if this youthful spirit stems from not having centuries of history and culture, of philosophical systems and laws, it is certainly much closer to that of our bold generation than to the nonexistent ones of many European countries... For our film industry, following the American model (what other model exists? Not even the Russian one anymore) can mean a great deal. By setting aside the historical superficiality of some American films, rejecting cinema that is a poor imitation of the theater, and absorbing (and this will be easy) the freshness, boldness, strength, and the boisterous yet wholesome exuberance found in most films from across the ocean, our industry —bolstered by the relevant Directorate—will rise to that material and spiritual maturity that will open the door to the greatest success.

Likewise, on a more mundane level, certain personal stances taken by Mussolini with Freddi 257 regarding films featuring politically "inappropriate" scenes are significant (the depiction, in one case, of an episode inciting rebellion against a "starvation-inducing" government, through its oppressive taxation, of the poor, and, in another case, the hiding of weapons in preparation for a revolutionary action) or morally "inappropriate" (because they were erotically "in bad taste" or because they referred to the use of narcotics 258).

Given these circumstances, cinema could not help but be affected by the Fascist "cultural revolution" as well. In fact, by 1937–38, both in the specialized press and in the political press, criticism of the banality and bourgeois escapist nature of much of the national film output—along with demands for its greater politicization—became increasingly numerous and at times peremptory. Among the most recurring demands were that film plots have a direct connection to the reality of fascism and place greater emphasis on the "sense of order," family unity, and the "noblest models of our

258 As he once told Freddi (see ibid., I, p. 389), the logic that drove Mussolini in many of his censorship interventions—not only in cinema—was: “often the mere articulation of a problem is enough to bring about its effects.”

race,” the “new figure,” and the value of and attachment to the land and the peasant civilization of the Italians 259. At the same time, there was growing direct and indirect intervention by the General Directorate for Cinematography in all areas (guidance in the selection of subjects, censorship, subsidies, distribution, etc.). The results of this two-pronged approach were not particularly striking; for the regime, however, they were by no means insignificant: for it, this was, after all, a way to circulate—often almost imperceptibly—certain models of behavior more and more while diminishing others, and this, at the mass level, was and remains for any type of totalitarian regime one of the surest, albeit slow, instruments of cultural integration.

Still on the subject of information and mass culture, the greatest effort to intensify and make politicization more effective, eliminate dissenting voices, and control even the most specialized and hitherto neglected sectors was, however, the one directed at periodicals and the publishing industry. And this was despite everything that had already been done in this field in previous years.[260] The driving force behind this effort was the Ministry of Popular Culture, established in May 1937 on the basis of the former Ministry of the Press and Propaganda.[261] This origin has meant that the novelty of the concept underlying its establishment has often been underestimated by historians. In fact, it was not merely, as is often believed, a simple name change and an expansion (the new ministry’s staff soon numbered four times that of its predecessor). The establishment of the Ministry of Popular Culture was in fact driven by a logic and a program far more ambitious than those that had guided the creation of its predecessor. The Ministry of Press and Propaganda had, as its name suggests, relatively limited responsibilities characteristic of the objectives the regime still set for itself at the time—objectives that, for the most part, were still those of a modern authoritarian state (ultimately, above all, censorship and propaganda). And it had carried out these tasks in a manner that was still essentially ad hoc and without a clear definition of its responsibilities vis-à-vis those of other ministries and especially the party, so that interference and overlapping initiatives between them were not uncommon

“' See P. V. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, op. cit., pp. 101 ff. (on the general activities of the Ministry of Popular Culture) and pp. 173 ff. (on the press in particular).

conflicts and outright clashes. Its successor (and the name chosen for it is telling) tended, in line with the regime’s new totalitarian phase, toward objectives—as has been noted—that were far more ambitious. Propaganda in the strict sense—that is, mass politicization—was left to or delegated, as the case may be, to the PNF and its personnel. The Ministry of Popular Culture was responsible for other tasks: directly controlling all mass cultural activities (including “minor” ones, such as theater and music), to completely “integrate” them and “orient” them toward a “totalitarian” perspective—one that was, at the same time, extremely rigid regarding routine and extremely flexible regarding the possibility of any change of course, even the most radical, should the opportunity arise—so as to establish a single moral, cultural, and political environment throughout the country, without discrepancies of any kind. An environment capable of fully assimilating the political content—the “propaganda”—necessary for the regime to shape collective behavior that was always in unison with Mussolini’s policies.

As we shall see later, this second objective was achieved only very partially and, moreover, generally only superficially. And even in the organization of the various activities, the results—though notable—

were neither totalitarian nor uniform. This was due in part to the objective difficulty of achieving it, and in part to interference from other ministries (especially the Ministry of National Education), which were always reluctant to relinquish a series of powers assigned to them in the past, as well as from the party and, more generally, from personal agendas and "higher" interests (real or presumed) that had been established beforehand (a typical case being the Stefani Agency, which M. Morgagni—drawing on the sensitivity of the task assigned to her and her personal friendship with Mussolini—managed to keep largely autonomous, especially regarding its activities abroad), partly because certain initiatives fell under the shadow of individual party leaders who regarded them as their own and therefore sought to manage them as much as possible according to their own criteria and interests of power (a typical example, in the field of the visual arts, is the case

262 The Ministry of Popular Culture resumed—at the urging of the Supreme Defense Commission—its direct involvement in domestic propaganda in mid-1938. In 1935, on the occasion of the war in Ethiopia, the so-called Propaganda Units had been established both domestically and abroad. Once the conflict ended, the NUPIE units for overseas operations continued to function, while those for domestic operations had practically ceased all activity. In anticipation of a possible conflict, in June 1938, they were reactivated and expanded with a more widespread scope than in the past (especially regarding propaganda in "rural communities and at factories" and through the use of rural teachers and "intelligent workers"). See Ministry of Popular Culture, Topic XX. Propaganda Units at Home and Abroad. Their Function and Development (secret publication, no date, but from 1939). There is a lack of precise information regarding the actual activities of the NUPIE; however, they likely had no real significance.

(the Cremona and Bergamo awards—the former a "farinacciano" and the latter a "bottaiano")—and, finally, to some extent because it was not uncommon for those who wished to escape, at least to some degree, the "dictatorship" of the Ministry of Popular Culture to seek—and often obtain—the patronage of one of the regime's most powerful figures (the most powerful being the Ciano clan) and sometimes even of Mussolini himself. Despite this, the results—as has been noted—were by no means insignificant. Control over the daily and periodical press of every kind (including serialized publications, children's publications, and comic books) became effective and pervasive in the second half of the 1930s, bringing with it formal and substantive standardization. The Ministry of Popular Culture, in fact, intervened in everything, from the selection of editors and journalists to the choice of topics to be covered and how to present them, the space to be allocated to them, and sometimes even the typeface to be used (among its initiatives was the directive issued to all newspapers to always write "Duce" in all capital letters, so as to emphasize Mussolini's superiority over everyone, even the King). If we add that it also held powers regarding seizures and suppressions (transferred in October 1935 from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of the Press and Propaganda), it decided on the appropriateness of any new journalistic initiative, controlled subsidies and the allocation of newsprint, and that in November 1939 it succeeded (after a protracted struggle lasting nearly two years) in extending its "jurisdiction" even to the official press of the National Fascist Party (which until then had been under the party's Press Office). It is easy to understand the extent of the Ministry of Popular Culture's power in the press sector and how much greater it was than that previously held by the regime—and, therefore, its potential capacity to influence and manipulate the masses through the creation and imposition of a homogeneous cultural environment that was, little by little, increasingly closed off to voices incompatible with it 263. To this end, the Ministry of Popular Culture also took charge (in collaboration with the Ministry of the Interior) of controlling the importation of foreign daily and periodical publications, progressively restricting them (especially those from France), and extended its authority to the publishing industry (a sector that until then had been subject to only relatively limited and indirect prior control by the regime, thanks above all to the self-censorship exercised by major

publishers), assuming—alongside the right to seize publications—the right to exercise prior control over translations and reprints of previously published books. Empowered by this authority, it launched in mid-1938 what came to be known as the “book purge.” With few exceptions, during the period in question, the “purge” targeted primarily the works of Jewish and communist authors 2M. Given the significance of writers of Jewish origin in contemporary literature, the particularly broad interpretation applied to the terms “Jewish” and “communist,” and the parallel campaign against the “foreign-loving plague” that “afflicted” the Italian bourgeoisie—a campaign waged by numerous Fascist press outlets and, foremost among them, *Il Tevere*— the “purge” led to a significant reduction in the foreign literature freely available in Italy. Nor, once underway, was the “book purge” limited to translations of foreign books or, of course, to the introduction of original editions of those that had been banned. In fact, the Ministry of Popular Culture also undertook a more general review of all books published from 1914 onward “with the aim of withdrawing all those volumes that, being politically and morally harmful, might still be read or requested” 266. The most hardline elements would have wanted the “purge” to cut deep not only into anti-fascist writings and—once the racial campaign had been set on the track of anti-Semitism—into works by Jewish authors, but also into all those that revealed a psychological tendency not to accept the present “as a value” and to flee “toward the future and toward the past” or, worse, to “become a subversive” of it.” 7. Such a drastic revision, however, was practically impossible and would in any case have been counterproductive. The books targeted were thus

264 In preparing for the launch of the “literary purge” and in determining which works it was to remove from circulation, the Center for Anti-Communist Studies in Rome—and in particular its Literature Section—played a significant role. The Center very early on became one of the channels for Nazi cultural and political penetration in Italy. In October 1937, in Venice, its representatives met with a German delegation to “establish closer ties in the field of anti-communist propaganda.” One of the Literature Section’s main focuses, as early as the end of 1936, was denouncing the “influence of Judaism on the pro-Bolshevik mentality of certain Italian circles.” Between late 1937 and early 1938, the section drew up an initial list of foreign authors widely translated in Italy whom it proposed to ban. Among them were A. Huxley, L. Feuchtwanger, R. Leonhard, A. Gide, R. Rolland, and A. Maurois.

See ACS, Ministry of Popular Culture, box 126, file “Center for Anti-Communist Studies”; Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Division of General Affairs and Research (1903–49), box 430.

265 See “La deplorata esterofilia,” in *Il Tevere*, January 16, 1938. For the author of the article—almost certainly T. Interlandi—anti-fascism “is not merely insult and slander against Fascism; it is the denial of a well-defined set of ideal values.” When the issue was framed in these terms, the number of authors whose works should not be translated became vast. The attack on Italian publishers who encouraged the “xenophile plague” was also extremely fierce; the columnist called for drastic measures against them, first and foremost the withholding of state funds: “The most audacious among these cultural smugglers brazenly siphon money from the state coffers; and they let the honorable men cast their votes, approve their agendas, and wear out their inkwells. Words fly away, but business remains. What is to be done? It would be enough to cut off state funding, refuse to provide resources, or at least ration them; to make these industrialists of cultural prostitution understand that everything has a limit, that it is time to put an end to this... We would see them fall into line from one day to the next; and we would no longer need to humiliate ourselves in these controversies.”

relatively few. Aside from a certain number of writings by anti-fascists and dissident fascists (the vast majority of which are now practically impossible to find) and by Jewish authors, the genre that bore the brunt of the “purge” was historical and pseudo-historical literature on brigandage, serialized novels,

and above all “erotic” literature. In this latter field, the censors did not limit themselves to ostracizing Casanova, Guido da Verona, Pitigrilli, Mantegazza, and Notari, but—under the pretext that they were published by Jewish publishers—they plunged their moralizing scalpel even into some popular editions of ancient and modern classics, extending the ban on their sale to street stalls as well.

Another initiative closely linked—to the point of constituting one of its essential elements, even if its most substantial results could obviously have been achieved over a longer period—to the “cultural revolution” and thus to the totalitarian turn of the second half of the 1930s was the school reform designed and partially implemented by Bottai.

In 1935–36, the school system, too, underwent its own “reorganization.” De Vecchi’s “watch,” as he himself called it 269, at the Ministry of National Education had meant for the school system a further significant step toward centralization, the reduction of educational autonomy, the dismantling of the remaining self-governing bodies such as the Higher Council, and the fascistization of the teaching staff and curricula. In 1936–37, the last school year to begin under De Vecchi’s administration, the number of teachers who—as a result of this policy—left the profession was six times the normal figure. Also during De Vecchi’s tenure, military culture courses had been introduced in middle and high schools with the aim of “establishing and maintaining in young people the conceptual identity between national life and military life” 270. By then, however, it was no longer through such measures—or, perhaps, through other “tweaks” to the Gentile reform—that the regime could resolve the problem of the school system. From 1923 to 1925, the school population had grown significantly. The number of elementary school students had risen from 398,100 to 518,700, that of middle school students from 326,604 (8.5 per thousand inhabitants) to 674,546 (15.6 per thousand), and the number of university students from 43,235 (1.1 per thousand) to 371,512 (1.7 per thousand)[271]. Such a significant increase—which, moreover, occurred largely during a period of severe economic crisis—was a source of pride for the regime, but also a source of considerable difficulty due to the labor market’s inability to adequately absorb a large portion of the high school and college graduates churned out each year 272. Nor, in the long run, could the discontent of so many families and of the young people in the upper classes themselves be ignored, nor the criticism from educational theorists regarding the content and teaching methods established by the Gentile reform—a framework that was proving increasingly ill-suited to the reality of a school system meant to serve a mass society. And then—most important of all—there was the regime’s dissatisfaction with a school system that, despite its progressive fascistization, remained essentially a system conceived from the perspective of the liberal bourgeoisie and which, therefore, the fascist regime and Mussolini felt was increasingly alien and even antithetical to their own, and highly dangerous for the future of fascism.

270 On De Vecchi’s tenure, see D. Bertoni Jovine, *La scuola italiana dal 1870 ai nostri giorni* (The Italian School from 1870 to the Present), Rome 1975, pp. 345 ff., as well as the aforementioned volume by De Vecchi himself. De Vecchi’s removal from the Ministry of National Education was greeted with joy in nearly all educational circles, which, at every level, had suffered the consequences of his military-style authoritarianism. A report by the PS dated November 16, 1936, is telling: “The replacement of Minister of National Education De Vecchi gave rise to genuine expressions of jubilation, such was the harm, arbitrariness, and mismanagement that had resulted from said official. All the more so because Bottai is considered a man of culture and sound preparation and one of the most faithful servants of Fascism, for which he has always made a good impression.

“The only regret is that De Vecchi’s appointment—with the full powers granted to him—essentially resulted in a series of significant damages; all the dismissals or retirements, all the appointments of individuals he protected or favored, regardless of academic qualifications and merits, amount to

substantial sums that the State will have to pay; the same applies to school superintendents, etc. One of the most recent cases is cited, among others: the Rector of the University of Bologna, censured by De Vecchi because he had decided—after having tried in vain and for a long time to have a ceremony urgently requested by the University of Bologna scheduled, and despite the silence of the Minister of National Education—to set the date for that ceremony, he went to see the Duce to protest the censure, and the Duce reportedly replied that De Vecchi should be left where he caused the least harm.

Mussolini, as has already been noted 273, had considered the Gentile reform "a mistake" since 1931 and intended to remedy it. Despite this, for five years he preferred not to address the issue in concrete terms—partly, probably, due to the urgency of other problems, and partly due to a lack of clear ideas regarding the type of reform to be implemented and the right person to entrust it to. Once the war in Africa had ended, however, faced with the worsening problems in the school system and, above all, the need to involve schools in the "totalitarian turn" being implemented throughout civil society, the necessity of proceeding with a radical reform became urgent. And the right man was also found to conceive and implement it with a steady and uncompromising hand.

"The school system is indeed in a real crisis due to a complex of disorganization stemming from the Quadrunviro's highly personal policies. Meanwhile, it is said that the already exorbitant school fees would be further increased due to the need to construct new school buildings.

"The choice of De Vecchi is viewed unfavorably, and it is said that if it were possible to rid the Party of these encrustations of staunch, extreme selfishness, the Party would truly be Italy's good fortune" (ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence [1922–43], 47/R, file "C. M. De Vecchi," subfile 3).

272 See, regarding this entire aspect, M. Barbagli, *Intellectual Unemployment and the School System in Italy*, Bologna 1974, Chapters VI and VII, which clearly highlight "the partially dysfunctional nature of the school system with respect to the regime's needs" (p. 269) and how the School Charter fits into this context as "certainly the most systematic attempt made to modify the Italian school system and readapt it to the 'needs' of the labor market" (pp. 293 ff.). Although extremely useful for a proper understanding of this important aspect of social reality during the Fascist era, Barbagli's study underestimates the political reasons behind the Bottai reform, which were, in fact, the decisive factors.

Very few figures in the more than twenty-year history of fascism played a role or held as much importance as Giuseppe Bottai did. And none—apart from Mussolini, of course—had a greater one. This was not only due to his extremely long, practically uninterrupted tenure in the highest government and public offices, but also because almost none of the men at the top of the Fascist hierarchy expressed the essence of true Fascism so intrinsically and genuinely, nor worked with such awareness, ability, and consistency to infuse it into the regime and society. He had the advantage, compared to a Farinacci and a Turati—and, if you will, a Balbo (though a discussion of Balbo would need to be much more detailed, since Balbo's fascism, while certainly no less genuine, was so "personalistic" that it almost always ended up seeming "out of tune")— he benefited from a cultural background, a sense of reality, and organizational skills that they lacked or possessed to a lesser degree. Certainly, Rocco as well—and even more so Grandi—were central figures in the twenty-year history of fascism. Grandi, in particular, can probably be considered the "second man" of fascism, the most prominent figure after Mussolini and, in many respects, the "alternative" to him. Yet, as true fascists, they cannot be compared

to Bottai. Rocco, despite his sincere commitment to fascism, remained at heart a conservative—as modern as one might wish, highly intelligent, but still a conservative—bound to a moral and cultural world that was not that of fascism, a moral and cultural world that engaged with the reality of mass society but was not an expression of it. Grandi was certainly more fascist than Rocco in this respect, but, at heart—even if the statement may seem paradoxical—he was more Mussolinian than fascist; and not by chance, because for him, fascism was meant to be temporary and was necessary for Italy at that historical moment; that is, it was a sort of parenthesis which, as such, had to come to an end at a certain point and which, therefore, effectively denied at its very root the entire perspective of "Fascist civilization" and the "new man." It was precisely that vision, however, that constituted the moral driving force behind the most genuine form of Fascism—and of which Bottai was, among the leaders of the Fascist movement, the most lucid and convinced interpreter and the one who worked hardest to bring it to fruition. Furthermore, he was a man of culture, endowed with remarkable intelligence and political sensitivity (even if he lacked the mettle and tenacity of a Farinacci or a Balbo, so that he never ventured beyond the uncertain boundary of what was "permissible"), possessing a critical spirit and flexibility that have at times misled contemporaries and historians into seeing him as a sort of liberalizing force and a critic of fascism, whereas in reality his criticism and his liberalism were entirely internal to fascism and served to deepen and expand its roots and development, making it more effectively totalitarian. Extremely significant in this regard is what he would write to his son in April 1944 to explain his fascist experience and how he and others who, like him, had held prominent positions during the twenty-year period had lived through it 274:

we were led to trust above all in ourselves; which means in our will, which led us to believe our creative power was unlimited, rather than in our conscience, which would have shown us its limits... and, scornful of that maxim of our forefathers, according to which politics is "part of the possible," we acted as if politics were "part of the impossible," of the marvelous, of the miraculous. Hence the tragic disparity between the plans we cherished or put into effect and the actual possibilities, which has led us to this terrifying collapse.

Anyone familiar with the fascist memoirs written after the end of fascism cannot help but admire the self-critical effort and sincerity of these words; yet to see in them—as some have done—merely a self-critical document, evidence of repentance, or an inner reckoning by the author is not possible: for in them lies, in fact, and—for the historian—above all, the most genuine key to understanding and evaluating Bottai's fascism and its totalitarian intransigence, which was moral even before it was political. That intransigence was the primary characteristic of true fascism 275.

On a personal level, Mussolini did not like Bottai and must have felt a touch of jealousy toward him because of his ability to attract the sympathy of so many young intellectuals. This did not, however, prevent him from respecting Bottai and considering him—rightly so—one of his best men, even if he was sometimes unable to see through to completion what he had begun so well. It is telling that in *Storia di un anno* he would barely mention him, sparing him the scathing criticism that he would, instead, direct copiously at Grandi. This can be explained by the different roles the two had played in the events of July 25, but it also reflects an underlying esteem, which, moreover, shines through in the page dedicated to him in the so-called *Pensieri pontini e sardi*: "He is a valiant soldier and a sharp writer; but everything he begins remains unfinished; as a politician, he is restless, but also courageous...; he is not entirely transparent»... 276. The fact that in July '32 he had abruptly ended his tenure as Minister of Corporations should not be misleading: the reasons that had led Mussolini to that decision 277 were purely political and did not imply a negative judgment of the man. It is therefore not surprising that, when, in November >36, he decided to resolve the issue of education, he thought of him specifically, making a choice that, from his point of view, could not have been better 278.

“Critica fascista,” Bottai’s journal, was the publication among the major Fascist periodicals that had dealt most extensively and most unsparingly with the issues of culture, youth, and education. In 1936 alone, it had published numerous articles—some by Bottai himself—that were equally critical of the existing school system and its effectiveness in meeting the regime’s needs. Among the magazine’s contributors—and, more generally, within Bottai’s circle—were some of the leading educational theorists of the time, such as Luigi Volpicelli and Nazareno Padellaro, who combined a sound and modern understanding of pedagogical issues with an equally firm awareness of the decisive influence that schools would have on the regime’s future, of the inadequacy—and, indeed, the effect contrary to the aims of Fascism that the Gentile educational system had, and of the need—to quote Padellaro—for the full realization of that “educating state” that would bury “the regime of opinions” and establish that “of convictions” 279. Finally, Bottai—both because he had headed the Ministry of Corporations and because of the interest he had always taken in economic and social issues—was personally aware, as few others were, of the need to rebalance the relationship between schools and the labor market and to ensure that increased schooling did not become a factor in “useless departures from rural families” and, more generally, social discontent. Above all, he had very clear ideas on how to achieve the state’s totalitarian control over civil society and on the decisive

278 It is interesting to note that during the Italian Social Republic (RSI), while there were numerous and violent attacks on Bottai and his management of the regime’s education policy—to the point of portraying him as a veritable saboteur of that policy—no attacks were directed at the School Charter, the authorship of which was attributed outright to Mussolini. See T. M. Mazzatosta, “Education and Schooling in the Italian Social Republic,” in *Storia contemporanea*, January–February 1978, pp. 69 ff.

a role that, to this end, involved the comprehensive and systematic education of young people (which he, however, conceived in a far less dogmatic manner and one more open to the contributions and sensibilities of the young people themselves than did Mussolini and most of the Fascist leadership 280) and, therefore, first and foremost, the school system. Significant in this regard is his failed attempt—motivated by a concern to avoid dualisms that would inevitably have made the comprehensive education of the younger generations less effective, but probably also by a lack of confidence in the party’s ability to adequately select the personnel needed to carry out such a delicate task—to prevent, shortly after being appointed minister, the GIL —the new organization overseeing all youth, created in October 1937—from being placed directly under the PNF Secretariat and thus removed from the control of the Ministry of National Education, to which the ONB281 had instead been subordinate. Given these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the fundamental principles of the new Fascist school system outlined by Bottai in his Charter of Education 282 and approved by the Grand Council on February 15, 1939, along with “lively applause” for Bottai himself 283, are among the most coherent concepts that Fascism managed to devise within the framework of the “totalitarian turn” of the second half of the 1930s. And everything suggests that, had the outbreak of war not slowed it down 284 and had the end of the regime not derailed it, the Bottai reform—especially if the financial resources to fully implement it had not been lacking 285—would not have failed, over time, to yield results that were anything but unsatisfactory for the regime.

This is not the place for a technical exposition and examination of the School Charter and the reform measures adopted by Bottai on its basis. For the purposes of our discussion, it suffices to say that the reform took partial account of a whole series of modern foreign pedagogical ideas—from Kerschensteiner to Dewey to pedagogical activism—envisaged the use of modern teaching aids such as film and radio, and incorporated some of the most widespread criticisms of the previous school system

voiced by families, teachers, and educational theorists 286. In particular, it placed great emphasis—somewhat justifiably, but also quite demagogically (in an anti-bourgeois vein)—on work, which it introduced as a subject of instruction. As for rebalancing the relationship between school and the labor market, the reform did everything possible to discourage and hinder enrollment in middle school and to direct as many young people as possible from peasant, working-class, and artisan backgrounds toward technical-vocational and artisan schools, which were destined to become, "along with elementary school, the school of the working classes, the great mass school, where the majority of Italian youth must find fulfillment of their professional and cultural needs, without harboring false illusions regarding middle schools" 287. The concern to avoid a school that "fosters ambitions, creates unemployed and discontented masses, and serves as a constant source of disorder and disruption, in the country's productive life no less than its moral life" 288—and thus the choice of a highly selective school system—was accompanied, however, by another concern no less deeply felt by the most genuine form of Fascism, though certainly less easy to put into practice: that of reshaping the ruling class through the school system, reducing the "bourgeois" presence within it and, conversely, increasing the "working-class" presence. In the first regard, this was to be achieved primarily through an increasingly rigorous selection process; in the second, by ensuring that the state guaranteed "the continuation of studies for capable but less-affluent young people." To this end, the reform called for a radical "reorganization of resources"—that is, on the one hand, the consolidation into a single fund of all existing and future funds and appropriations earmarked for this purpose (donations to schools, scholarships, private charity, contributions from labor confederations, etc.) and, on the other, its use exclusively through a series of State Colleges where "capable but not well-off" young people could continue their studies and, at the same time, receive adequate "political and military" training.

283 See the PNF's "Order Sheet" of February 16, 1939, which also publishes the "report to the Duce" with which Bottai presented the School Charter to the Grand Council. On October 18, 1938, the Grand Council had heard a preliminary report by Bottai on middle school and had approved his proposal to proceed with "a reform corresponding to the new cultural, social, and economic needs of national life under the Regime of the Fasci and Corporations" ("Order Sheet" of October 26, 1938).

285 From the 1930–31 fiscal year to the 1936–37 fiscal year, spending on national education rose from 1,505 to 1,810 million. By the 1937–38 fiscal year, it exceeded two billion, and by the 1940–41 fiscal year, it reached 3,278 million. See Ministry of the Treasury—General Accountant of the State, The State Budget for the Fiscal Years 1930–31 through 1941–42, Rome 1951, pp. 360 ff.

Amid the anti-bourgeois campaign then in full swing, this measure—along with the introduction of "work education" (regarding which a typical example is the enthusiastic comment in

Calabria Fascista 289: "At last, a school will be established where 'young gentlemen' will learn to get their hands dirty")—was the one that garnered the most support in the most genuinely Fascist circles. It suffices, for everyone, to recall the commentary Berto Ricci devoted to it in an article, symptomatically titled *La scuola salta il fosso* 290, whose central concept was this: up until that point, there had been a bourgeois school system that codified social stratification, from which, "barring a major blunder," emerged—as a "dreadful rule"—the "daddy's boy" or, at most, the "cleric," and which constituted the "cohesive core of the bourgeoisie";

now, against the bourgeoisie and against the mad brutality of leftist revolutions—which behead intelligence, only to then have to reattach the severed head to the same shoulders—Fascism affirms and implements its culture of the people, its capacity, and its hierarchy of values.

However important and politically significant they may be, it is not on its individual aspects and educational content that one must rely to understand the political value of the Bottai reform and its adherence to the spirit and aims of the regime's "totalitarian turn." Confirmation of this, moreover, can be found in Bottai's own writings, when—on the eve of submitting the School Charter to the Grand Council—he wrote in *Critica fascista*[291] that "at the heart of the reform lies a political necessity" and that "the educational necessity, which must strictly adhere to it, comes second."

In fifteen or more years, the fascistization of the school system had become nearly total, but that was not enough. As Bottai had had occasion to say in the Chamber of Deputies on March 17, 1937,[292], the fascistization that had taken place thus far was already a great deal—a very, very great deal—compared to the supposed agnosticism of the past. But that is not all, because the issue is not merely a matter of inspiring young people with the political ideals of Fascism... Rather, there is a deeper way of understanding the political nature of the school... School is the barometer of the country's moral life. It is a measure of it; perhaps the measure. It is not enough, then, to consider it merely as a body of teachings that must be animated by a political faith and not remain indifferent to it—much less opposed to it. The school itself has a direct, irreplaceable value within this faith. The value of an institution that, in and of itself, originally has a decisive social function. We realize this when we consider whether or not the school is capable of shaping the individual

291 See the first of the three anonymous editorials in the February 1, *939, issue of *Critica fascista*, p. 97—Its attribution to Bottai is evident from its inclusion in G. Bottai, *La Carta della Scuola*, op. cit., pp. 380 ff. Moreover, Bottai had stated even more explicitly two months earlier, while speaking to teachers in Cremona, that the reform he was about to launch was "decidedly political, without pretense" (see ibid., pp. 209 ff.).

new, educating him in a vibrant and modern conception of culture and life, the school as a means of character formation and an expression of civilization... It is a matter of conceiving the school as directly serving the national reality—which consists of agriculture, industry, commerce, and work that is defined, classified, and recognized within the constitutional-political order itself—because it is above all a matter of shaping characters, educating consciences, and promoting that awareness of one's own mission among people, in which alone humanism can consist.

If the regime's goal was to create, through the school system, the "new man" and, indeed—as Bottai and his principal collaborators293 maintained—a "new fascist humanism" that would so permeate young people that they would "speak fascist with the same naturalness with which, under the nurturing care of their nurse, they begin to stammer the first words of their language" 294 and that, in doing so, they would secure the future of Fascism ("the Fascism that will endure—Bottai told the teachers of Ferrara 295—the Fascism that will outlive our own lives, the Fascism that will perpetuate Mussolini's name and glory through the years; it is you who must do this, and you do it in the minds, spirits, and hearts of the children of Italy") the first thing to do was not simply to make the school even more "black-shirted," as De Vecchi and his predecessors had done, or—worse still—to make it, as Gentile had attempted, culturally more refined and selective with respect to a certain type of typically bourgeois culture. For fascistization to be genuine, to become education—an unconscious norm of behavior capable of truly influencing attitudes toward life, work, politics, and from young people into all of society 296, it was necessary for the school—at all levels—to express a culture that was not merely fascist-influenced, but truly and wholly fascist, and to make young people live as fascists from their very first contact with the world outside the family. It was necessary for the school system to cease being bourgeois, to stop being shaped by and transmitting values and ideals that—even if cloaked

in black shirts—were neither fascist nor, much less, popular; and since they were not popular, they had no hold on the broader working-class society that had by then "swallowed up bourgeois society," thereby making it wary and keeping it at a distance from fascism. Typical in this regard are the arguments with which, during the preparatory phase of the reform, Luigi Volpicelli criticized the school system then in place—and thus the Gentile reform itself (toward which, probably out of deference to its author, Bottai was very sparing with public judgments 297)—and called for an education that would have absolute value and conform to the fascist "new humanism," and thus be truly popular 298:

The bourgeois school was a profound force in bourgeois society. It exerted a vigorous influence on the family and the environment... With the decline of bourgeois civilization, the school no longer had a say; or it withdrew reluctantly into a hollow technicality, distrustful of life and, in turn, a cause of distrust on the part of life itself, due to its very function; or, with the passing of that epic era of which even the bourgeois revolution could undoubtedly boast—having lapsed into the utilitarianism and economism of a materialistic life— the school suffered the same fate; it faded away just as the fervor that had animated the revolution in the days of its battles and conquests had faded, and it, too, became utilitarian and materialistic. The rebirth of the school, when it is restored to the dignity of education, cannot take place unless it begins to fight bourgeois materialism relentlessly, unless it becomes the herald and clarifier of new ideals of life, unless it becomes a school of the people—not merely because the people attend it, but because of the substance and loftiness of the ideals that animate it. The crisis of the contemporary school, as has been said, therefore represents the ferment of a new spirituality, a civic renewal in the name of work, and a new concept of life.

The Bottai reform, as noted, did not progress beyond the initial stages of implementation. It is therefore difficult to say what its concrete results might have been for the regime. The conditions for them to be positive, however, were present. If Fascism had remained in power, it is in fact difficult to imagine that a mass popular education such as that envisaged by the School Charter would not have succeeded—in a closed society such as the one Italy was becoming—in influencing young people, especially as the older teachers, trained before Fascism and in the "bourgeois" school system, were gradually replaced by those trained in the Fascist political and cultural climate. This explains why the Fascists who most consciously grappled with the issue of the regime's future regarded the School Charter as a decisive step in the "Fascist revolution." And they did so in light of cultural and political attitudes that clearly reflect the cultural diversity that by then distinguished the various generations of Fascists. Indeed, while a sincere but older fascist—who, in essence, had remained, psychologically and politically, in the era of Mussolini's 1923 slogan "strength and consensus"—such as Paolo Orano, wrote that with the School Charter "we have thus arrived at the fascist school, at the systematic regimentation of the teaching staff, schoolchildren, and students, for the vast undertaking of the revolution" 299—for a young fascist like Mimmo Sterpa, who lived through and expressed the reality of fascism fifteen years later and the spirit of the "cultural revolution" of the second half of the 1930s, with all its implications —both immediate and deeper ones—shared by the new generations of fascists 30°—the significance of the School Charter was, quite rightly, far more immediate and substantial.

297 Perhaps the most critical assessments of the Gentile reform were expressed by L. Volpicelli in a series of articles published between May 1938 and February 1939 in *Civiltà fascista* and subsequently collected in a volume bearing the same title, *La scuola italiana dopo la Riforma del '23* (Rome, 1939)- The accusations leveled at the Gentile reform by Volpicelli were of various kinds, ranging from the claim that it was a "counter-reform," an "expression of a bourgeois minority," which "aimed to drive the masses out of school," showing absolutely no concern for the poor classes, to the claim that it was "the epilogue and the historically most complete expression of liberalism" and, therefore, that it viewed the school as "merely a matter of culture and understood the school solely as a

temple of culture”—a culture, moreover, that was “entirely internal, idealistic, and liberal.” This explained why Fascism had long since begun “to feel, with regard to school reform, as if it were in a straitjacket, perhaps better suited to liberals than to Fascists.”

For G. Bottai’s official position, see *La Carta della Scuola*, op. cit., pp. 3, 96, 205 ff., and 420.

For G. Gentile’s commentary—also official—on the School Charter, see *La Carta della Scuola*, in *Corriere della Sera*, March 22, 1939.

As a revolution of principles, as the creator of a new climate, the School Charter—he wrote, drawing inspiration from a provision of the National Fascist Party (PNF) that aligned the day of the Fascist Conscription with the opening of the 301 school year—does not lend itself easily to comparisons with other reforms, not even with the best ones, nor with those that have given the school enduring values... Under a totalitarian regime, the school lives and operates in unity with the state: it does not ignore the state, it does not ignore society and its needs, it does not ignore politics... This is the source of our absolute certainty that the School Charter is more than a reform: it is a revolution, because through it the Fascist Revolution enters the school in its entirety... The concept of the “political school” replaces the pairing of “school and politics”… The School Charter vigorously promotes a movement within the school toward society and politics, and, at the same time, a movement from society and politics toward the school. The current School Reform is not confined to the walls of the Ministry’s offices, nor even to those of the classrooms—which are, by their very nature, more spacious and airy; it takes shape and is implemented throughout the entire nation; it calls upon everyone to collaborate, and poses new challenges not only to the school system itself, but to many other sectors and institutions of national life... Consider, for example, the far-reaching implications of just one of the many issues raised by the Charter: that of the relationship between the school and the family, which encompasses so many things, and which also—and especially—means “educating the family about the school” and, through active engagement with the new school and its essentially political and Fascist tasks, de-bourgeoisifying and politicizing it.

The School Charter and the reform it foreshadowed were expected to yield their most substantial results over time; however, the regime already had high immediate expectations from the new relationship between schools and the party’s youth organizations established by the Charter. The Fascist youth organizations (GUF, Fasci giovanili, ONB) had experienced significant growth in the first half of the 1930s, reaching—on paper—more than seven and a half million young members by 1937. We say “on paper” because a portion of these young people—difficult to quantify but by no means negligible—did not participate, or participated only minimally—partly by choice, partly due to a whole series of objective difficulties—in the activities of the organizations to which they belonged. Similarly, another portion was driven to join the Fascist organizations not so much by a genuine Fascist spirit on the part of their families—or, for the older ones, by the young people themselves—but rather by specific considerations ranging from conformism to the desire to take advantage of the activities and services (sports, recreation, health and hygiene, and welfare) offered. Thus, it is understandable that during the transition from the Fasci giovanili and the GUF to the PNF, as we have already noted 302, “enormous attrition” occurred. This does not detract from the fact that in just over a decade, the regime had achieved remarkable results in the organization of youth, which—as we have also already noted 303 —had a direct impact on the school system, given that by the end of the 1920s the ONB had been placed under the authority of the Ministry of National Education, which had significantly increased its presence in schools and, consequently, its ability to influence (albeit, generally, in a superficial manner) the political and activist education of young people. However, in the context of the “totalitarian turn” of

the second half of the 1930s, all of this was no longer sufficient. The indoctrination of youth had to be deepened both quantitatively and qualitatively, made effectively totalitarian, and designed to immerse young people ever more fully in an atmosphere and environment that left less and less room for other influences—in particular, those of the family and religion. Officially, the regime never missed an opportunity to proclaim its respect for these "fundamental institutions" and claimed to seek their cooperation in education. In reality, Fascism viewed religion as a dangerous rival that challenged its monopoly over youth and corrupted their spirit, and the family as a similar obstacle—even if it deluded itself into believing it was less dangerous, both because it was "transient" and because it hoped to eliminate it by conquering it from within, precisely through the youth. It is highly significant in this regard that the School Charter (in Declaration VII) referred to religion only as the "religion of the fathers" and, regarding the family, stated that "parents and relatives participate in the life of the School and learn there [emphasis added] that communion of purpose and method which sustains the strength of childhood and adolescence along the paths of the religion of the fathers and the destinies of Italy"

A key moment in this new phase—closely linked to school reform—was the establishment of the Gioventù italiana del littorio (Italian Youth of the Lictor), which took place in late 1937 with the merger of the ONB and the Fasci giovanili into a single organization intended to bring all youth under its umbrella. Bottai—who was already preparing the School Charter—would have liked, as we have already mentioned, for the GIL to be placed, like the ONB before it, under the authority of his ministry, which would thus have become the supreme and sole coordinator of youth policy. His efforts, however, were thwarted by the party, which succeeded in having the new organization placed directly under the authority of its secretary-general 305. The GIL encompassed all young people of both sexes aged six to twenty-one: "Figli della Lupa" (boys and girls) up to age eight, "Balilla" and "Piccole Italiane" from eight to fourteen, "Avanguardisti" and "Giovani Italiane" from fourteen to seventeen, and "Giovani Fascisti" and "Giovani Fasciste" from seventeen onward. Only the GUF remained outside the GIL; however, ties between the two organizations were strengthened by employing a number of university students within the GIL as sports instructors and political-organizational leaders. The GIL's tasks included the "spiritual, athletic, and pre-military training" of young people, the teaching of physical education in elementary and middle schools, providing support through summer camps, health camps, school patronage programs, the organization of trips and cruises, and the establishment and management of its own courses, schools, boarding schools, and academies. The School Charter assigned the GIL a far more significant and officially recognized "educational" role than that of the ONB; this role was to be carried out both within and alongside the school system but was also to continue until the age of twenty-one for those young people who left school before that age. The second declaration was explicit on this point:

In the Fascist order, school age and political age coincide. The school, the GII, and the GUF together form a unified instrument of Fascist education. The obligation to attend them constitutes school service, which binds citizens from an early age

305 For the GIL statute, see the "Foglio d'ordini," no. 187, October 29, 1937. Of note is the complete silence regarding religious education and assistance, which, by contrast, had been among the founding tasks of the ONB. For further details, see PNF-GIL, *Youth in Fascist Legislation*, Rome 1942. Finally, regarding the PNF's position and the criticisms it had long leveled at the Ministry of National Education's management of the ONB, see A. Aquarone, "Two Letters from Starace to Mussolini on Fascist Youth Organizations," in "Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato," September–December 1968, pp. 634 ff.

at age twenty-one. This service consists of attendance, from the fourth to the fourteenth year of school

and the GIL, and continues in the GIL until age twenty-one for those who do not pursue further studies. University students must be members of the GUF. A personal record book, to be appropriately linked to the work record book, certifies completion of school service, including for the purposes of individual evaluation in employment and work.

In fact, even during the years of greatest and most fruitful activity (up to 1940–41), the GIL's primary sphere of activity was, however, that connected to schools (physical education instruction, "Fascist Saturday," summer camps, camping trips, cruises, and participation in regime events). During these years, however, good results were achieved both in terms of general organization—especially with regard to girls (between 1937 and 1940, the total number of members grew by one million, and some progress was also made regarding the ratio of official to actual members 306)— as well as in terms of activities among working-class and peasant youth who were not continuing their studies and who, as *Critica fascista* 307 wrote, were mired in "profound and obscure ignorance… regarding the Regime"; so much so that during the "Fascist conscription" of 1939, out of 274,397 Young Fascists who joined the PNF, 35,999 were students and 24,633 were office workers, but 104,274 were workers and artisans and 109,491 were peasants 308.

Despite these positive results, the GIL was always the subject of much criticism, in particular for focusing almost exclusively on physical, athletic, and recreational activities while neglecting those more strictly political and educational; for interfering too much—and even more negatively than the ONB—in school activities; and for failing to fill too many of the hours that young people did not spend in school, with the result that "gaps in purity and

306	1937	1938	1939	1940
Figli della lupa	ì	1 387386	1 346389	1 387406
Balilla 4 609298	1 728263	1 746360	1 835239	
Little Italian Girls	J	1 669045	1 622766	1 739623
Avant-gardistsì	876530	906783	988733	
Young Italian Women J	1 443263	386867	441234	484204
Young Fascists	1 163363	1 168693	1 176798	1 313590
Young Fascist Women	256083	360377	450995	327112
Fascist University Groups	82 004	93 175	103 883	119 713

308 See "Foglio d'ordini," no. 241, October 16, 1939. Among the initiatives aimed at young workers, one may mention the publication of a special edition for them of the weekly "Libro e moschetto" and of "Appello," the official organ of the GUF in Palermo, as well as the establishment of forms of para-union assistance within the GIL. On the same topic, see "Critica fascista," which devoted numerous articles to it between late 1938 and early 1939.

in the revolutionary integrity of the principles instilled in them," to the extent that some even went so far as to propose the creation of "barracks-schools" where young people could be trained in the most thorough manner and shielded from negative external influences 309. And all this despite the fact that the regime's commitment to making "collaboration" between the school and the GIL effective was undoubtedly remarkable and manifested itself and continued through a whole series of complementary initiatives[310]—some aimed at providing young people with an increasingly comprehensive fascist education, and others at selecting and training new youth cadres to be deployed in schools, the GIL, and the party. Since it is impossible to discuss all of them in detail—and given that we will address some of them in the next chapter—we will limit ourselves to mentioning the most important ones: the expansion of the School of Fascist Mysticism (founded in Milan on the initiative of Arnaldo Mussolini in 1930), the creation in Rome of the Center for Political Preparation (described by *Critica fascista*

3,1 as “an act intended to further deepen the collaboration between the School and the Party”), and the reorganization of the National Institute of Fascist Culture to enable it to carry out more widespread activities (including the replacement—thanks to a skillful maneuver that prompted him to resign from the presidency—of G. Gentile, who had by then fallen out of favor with both a large part of the more genuinely fascist leadership and virtually all the new generation of fascists, with P. De Francisci) and, above all, the significant expansion of the Littoriali.

As significant as their results were, these initiatives—which targeted young people who were to some extent already formed or, at least, already politically oriented for better or worse—were, however, less important for the future of the regime than those aimed at influencing the mass of young people. This was all the more true because, no matter how hard it strove to control and determine everything, Fascism had to contend with other forces operating within the environment in which young people lived and were shaped. And while some of these “external” forces —those that were more or less explicitly anti-fascist—did not cause any real concern, given that their influence was entirely marginal, neutralizable through the regime’s repressive tools and, more importantly, with the consent of all components of the regime itself, others were neither marginal nor easily suppressed, since suppressing them would mean, for Fascism, coming into conflict with vast sectors of the country

310 For the debate on the relationship between schools and the GIL, see above all *Critica fascista*. Within this debate, there were those who, to make the collaboration more effective and to identify the two institutions, proposed that—at least in agricultural areas—school buildings and GIL buildings be combined. See ibid., p. 81.

and would spectacularly call into question the balance of power upon which the regime was founded. And this was impossible unless the “totalitarian turn” were given a character entirely different from the one—as we have seen—that Mussolini wanted and was able to give it.

The most powerful of these “external” forces were the family and religion. Due to their traditionalist and conservative nature, they had been two very important strengths for fascism in the past and, in many respects, still were. But they were so only within the framework in which fascism—and thus the regime—had generally operated up until the African War. From this perspective, even the 1931 crisis involving Catholic Action had not substantially affected religious sentiment at the mass level—and thus the attitude of Catholics toward the regime. In the new “totalitarian” context, the support of the family and religion did not enter into a crisis at the mass level, but clearly showed a tendency to side with the regime as it had been up until the war in Africa and to oppose its subsequent evolution. By this—let us be clear—we do not mean to say that they turned to the opposition; far from it: the lack of real alternatives, conformism, fear of the worst, and a good measure of genuine support kept them essentially loyal to the Fascist regime and to Mussolini. It was simply that, on certain issues—and foremost among these, the education of youth—they were inclined to increasingly accentuate their traditional tendency to react with imperviousness toward those initiatives with which they least agreed, to the point of exercising a sort of resistance against them—generally passive, but sometimes also active—aimed at preserving their own “private” space, to live on their own terms, according to their own traditions, values, and culture, in short.

During the Italian Social Republic (RSI), there was no shortage of those who would lash out violently against the family, considering it one of the primary culprits behind the regime’s failure. A typical example is what “Il regime fascista”312 wrote:

The Italian family was incapable of serving as a school of civic, patriotic, and religious education for

its children... In the near future, who will be responsible for the education of children for at least an entire generation? The State, the only entity capable of teaching what constitutes the social and political good of their nation. Young people, once they reach a certain age—for example, not before the age of ten or eleven—should be taken from their families and placed in boarding schools, academies, and institutes, where they will be thoroughly molded by the rigor of a school of high civic and military values. And the parents? They must calmly acknowledge their own inability and step aside gratefully.

Fascism—the most genuine form, the one that looked not only to the present but also to the future and conceived of reality in terms that were not merely conservative—had long realized that the family constituted a reality, a force hindering the effective fascistization of Italians. For a certain period, however, it had lulled itself into the belief that future fascist families would be different from the present ones, without understanding that in the vast majority of cases, future families were being shaped within the current ones and in their image and likeness. It had relied on the influence of the environment, on the "education" of the family carried out by the regime's machinery, and, ultimately, on conformism, without realizing that for the vast majority of families, the strongest form of conformity in this regard was that of the family itself; so much so that if any results had been achieved, this had occurred not among peasants, older workers, or the bourgeoisie, but among newly emerging working-class and petty-bourgeois families—that is, those lacking their own traditional culture and who owed (or believed they owed) their social advancement to Fascism and saw the Fascist youth organizations as a means of integration for their children. In the second half of the 1930s, the "education" of the family was entrusted not only to these means but also, on the one hand, to the school (as outlined in the Seventh Declaration of the School Charter) and, on the other, to the anti-bourgeois struggle, with a few tentative attempts to influence what was considered the family's strongest and weakest element at the same time: women. The results of this effort were almost entirely negative; its failure, however, occurred without direct "clashes" (that is, without specific measures being implemented: a typical example is the way in which proposals—even the more moderate ones by De Stefani—for a legal framework governing the political obligation of marriage and procreation were simply dropped), and this helps explain why it is so difficult to find clear traces of this aspect of the Fascist "cultural revolution."

Things turned out differently when it came to religion. Fascism's "hostility" toward the family was an entirely political matter—one might even say it was a matter of power over the younger generations. Culturally, fascism—the entire fascist movement, led by Mussolini3B—was in fact a staunch and convinced supporter of the family, which it viewed as one of the cornerstones of society, the guardian of a whole series of essential values to be preserved and certainly not allowed to dissipate, to be made even more socially active by "fascistizing" them, and certainly not to be suppressed. To the point that P. Orano went so far as to write that "under the fascist regime, the state considers itself and presents itself as a family system; it contrasts this fundamental principle with the vague concept of the people"314. The attitude toward religion was, in a certain sense, reversed. Apart from marginal and increasingly sparse sectors, for Fascism the recognition of the role of religion and the Church had always been—and was increasingly becoming—an entirely political, instrumental matter: first to undermine the People's Party and win the trust of Catholics and the Church, then to transform this trust into support for the regime and use it on the international stage. Culturally, however, Fascism was anticlerical and generally antireligious. To be more precise, it was "religious," but in the sense that it regarded itself as a religion and sought to establish itself as such; consequently, it either did not recognize any other religion or considered Catholicism a component of what Bottai defined as the "religion of the fathers"—that is, an aspect of its own. To understand this blend of fascist politics and culture, consider what Orano wrote in 1939:[315]

3.3 For Mussolini's position, see N. D'Aroma, *Mussolini segreto*, op. cit., pp. 127 ff.: "A nation is first and foremost an association of families. Le Play has sufficiently demonstrated to us that the social unit is the family." "Virtue, household economy, respect for women—whether as mothers or wives—love of work, thrift, and order" were its products. To protect them and to prevent the sterility of marriage, it was necessary for the family to be indissoluble: "It is indissolubility that perfects the couple, unites them, and binds them to the purpose of the State as well."

Under Fascism, every issue with the Church fades and disappears, because in Fascism there is a religious evolution. The Fascist State can only be conceived, believed in, served, and glorified in a religious manner. Can the "Black Shirt" attribute to the divine a judgment hostile to the phenomenon of Fascism? The enduring fervor, the enthusiastic demeanor, the daily sacrificial dedication, and the ritual gestures and words of the oath, the salute, the applause, and obedience—all manifest the irresistible transformation of duties, ideals, and political certainties into religious spirituality... In adherence to Fascism lies a mystical vocation that transforms civic conduct into a religious mission. In this—above all in this—must be sought the overwhelming inspiration, the redemptive conversion, that event which we wish to call revolutionary: a true illumination of the Italian soul that has reached the moment of synthesis in action—overwhelming inspiration, conversion, redemptive civil revolution, and illumination—which also act upon already religious spirits, even upon Catholic spirits. For, in short, this new development—the religious transformation of political consciousness—sets Italians on the path to a more concrete and responsible expression of religious sentiment. Fascism assigns a specific task to Italian Catholics. Since, in Italy, Catholicism allows for patriotism and national ideals, every virtue and every manifest religious will must simultaneously have civil efficacy, comforting and supporting that State in which the religious interpretation of social life is realized. The all-powerful State, the source of all good and of every upward national destiny: this is the sole framework within which, by realizing civic life and fascist coexistence, Catholics find that common understanding with all other Italians that will prepare the unity of the future, even in the metaphysical realms of belief.

Thus, the new reality, the transformative event, is Fascism—willed, believed in, and lived as a religion—a mighty oak that sinks its roots into mystery and raises and spreads its branches in the joyful manifestation of accomplished works and perpetual initiative. Thus, everything that Catholicism has of active substance, Fascism absorbs and draws sustenance from; it makes the Nation-State the most glorious kingdom of God on earth, and to religion—as the religion of the Italians—it delegates the solemn task of sublimating a people to the point where the civilization of a homeland overflows into the paths and destinies of other peoples. This was the mission of the Italian people. Our civic enthusiasm springs from the vibrant certainty that the religious spirituality of the fascist nation-state resolves the antithesis and overcomes the crisis, relieving the new European vanguard of the most disastrous burden of the past: the antagonism between religion and political history.

If we add to this the fact that religion, through the Church and its lay organizations, did not limit itself—like the family—to passive resistance, but also engaged in active resistance, it is easy to understand how direct and even fierce clashes were inevitable, and how they could not fail to occur in the second half of the 1930s.

As we have already seen,[316] the crisis of '31, in addition to marking a victory for fascism and dashing the hopes of those who had thought they could "Catholicize" fascism and use it to restore the state and society in a Catholic sense, had reduced the "historic turning point" of '29 to a "marriage of convenience" in which each party sought to get along and cooperate as much as possible (and as compatible with its own principles and interests) with the other, but also to strengthen its own position

relative to the other, and did not even rule out the possibility of a divorce. This modus vivendi lasted practically five years, emerging unscathed and apparently strengthened from the events of the Ethiopian War.[317] We say "apparently" because, while it is true that (after an initial period of uncertainty) the vast majority of Italian Catholics and the clergy themselves supported the Ethiopian campaign and subsequently also—as we shall see —the Fascist intervention in Spain—it is equally true that the new crisis between Fascism and the Church that erupted in 1938 had been brewing for some time and that—however important this support may have been in the eyes of Fascism—it could not possibly have prevented it.

It is a widespread view, supported by historical scholarship as well[3],[8], that this new crisis was caused by the "wound" inflicted on the Concordat by the introduction of racial legislation and by Mussolini's policy of increasingly close alignment with Nazi Germany. In reality, as we are now beginning to see[319], this is only partially true. Compared to the crisis of 1938, these were merely contributing factors which, however significant, were less important to the Church than the primary and chronologically earlier cause: the reignition of the conflict over Catholic Action; so much so that on the issue of Catholic Action, the Holy See reacted much more harshly and decisively than it did on the other two issues. Nor, on closer inspection, should this come as a surprise. Undoubtedly, Mussolini's policy toward Germany—of which anti-Semitic legislation was but one aspect—was viewed by the Church and by Catholics with extreme concern, and they saw its developments as steps taken by fascism toward statism, paganization, and, ultimately, war. It is difficult, however, to deny that attitudes toward the issue of race were quite varied. The first phase of Mussolini's racism—that shaped by the problems associated with Italy's "imperial" presence in East Africa—had not aroused any opposition either within the Church or among Catholics; indeed, there were even voices in favor of it, even within groups where critical sentiments toward fascism were most prevalent. 32° As for the second phase—the anti-Semitic one—it was experienced by the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the Catholic community in different ways, as will be seen later. With the exception of entirely marginal cases, while the latter was clearly opposed to anti-Semitic measures, the former was not often opposed to moderate anti-Semitic action manifested in the form of civil restrictions and reserved its clear opposition essentially for "blood" racism of the Nazi variety and its anti-Christian essence. The Holy See also followed a similar line, concerned above all with defending the rights acquired through the Concordat and its prestige; thus, its position ultimately consisted largely of defending Jewish converts and, subsequently, denouncing the "vulnus" inflicted on the Concordat by that part of the racial legislation that affected them. But in practice, the Holy See did not go any further than that. The same can be said regarding the threat of war. As will be discussed in greater detail in due course, the Holy See repeatedly raised its heartfelt voice in defense of the "supreme good"

of peace, but it never went so far as to explicitly condemn Nazism and Fascism as the forces responsible for the progressive escalation of the danger of war. Numerous valid arguments can be put forward to justify this stance, foremost among them that an explicit condemnation would certainly have provoked a harsh Nazi reaction against German Catholics and, almost certainly, some rash actions on the part of the Fascists as well. The fact remains, however, that even after he had to conclude that a European war was by then virtually inevitable—that is, toward the end of 1937[321]—the Holy See continued to rely on Mussolini's good offices to try to put an end to the anti-religious struggle in Germany[322] and to hope for a reversal of Italian policy toward Berlin. This explains why not only did it never present Mussolini with an ultimatum, but, on the contrary, it sought in matters of foreign policy not to irritate him too much—to the point that in early 1939 Pius XI rebuked Cardinal Verdier for speaking of a Vatican-France axis in opposition to the Rome-Berlin axis.[323] Meanwhile, regarding the true cause of the 1938 crisis—Catholic Action—he maintained a far more intransigent stance, going so far—in order to defend it—as to hint to Mussolini that fascism might be excommunicated.

The resolution of the 1931 crisis had had quite significant consequences for Catholic Action. Within the Roman Curia and the hierarchy, strong tensions had emerged toward Catholic Action on the part of those who considered it an obstacle to the establishment of an effective modus vivendi with the regime. On this point, it is necessary to be very clear. It would be wrong to think that this position was, for the most part, the result of a firm pro-fascist stance (which was, in fact, present in large sectors of the lower clergy, even though it was also within this same group that the most significant cases of anti-fascism were found). In some cases—not many, to be sure—it stemmed from the still-lingering hope of being able to "Catholicize" the regime. For most, however, it had another motivation: it arose, on the one hand, from a meta-historical view of fascism, seen essentially as a manifestation of the process of secularization and disintegration that had characterized modern civilization since the Renaissance and the

321 We infer the date from the fact that it was at the end of 1937 that the Special Administration of the Holy See's Assets began making contacts to transfer a portion of its European investments to the United States.

322 Bernardino Nogara's diary (dated March 6, 1938) indicates that Mussolini promised the pope he would intervene to put an end to the religious conflict in Germany.

323 In B. Nogara's diary, dated February 1, 1939, we read: "I reported to His Holiness my impressions regarding French approval of Vatican policy; namely, that the approval of the Communist and Socialist parties is harmful to the Holy See and is creating a deplorable confusion of ideas in France. His Holiness told me that I was right and that, when he received Cardinal Verdier, he expressed his disapproval of the cardinal's coining of the phrase 'Vatican-France axis' as a counterpoint to the 'Rome-Berlin axis.'"

From the Reformation onward, and thus as something foreign to Catholic tradition, but, in its own way, fully in line with the "secular crisis"; on the one hand, it stemmed from the still ambiguous, superficial, and conflicted commitment of the Catholic world (and the Italian Catholic world in particular) to democracy, which made it less sensitive to many authoritarian aspects of the regime and more willing to accept those that corresponded (or seemed to correspond) to its culture, interests, and prejudices; and, yet again, from the conviction that—while it was not possible to directly "Catholicize" the regime—in the new situation brought about by the Conciliation and in the face of the regime's own inability to create a truly fascist ruling class of its own, a gradual Catholicization of civil society was nevertheless possible, which, at a certain point, would ultimately prove decisive. To consider dissolving Catholic Action would therefore have been absurd, both for reasons of prestige and because of the repercussions such a decision would have had in other countries, and above all because Catholic Action constituted the best instrument both for preventing or, at least, effectively countering the erosion of Catholic forces—and in particular of young people—by fascism, as well as for bringing about—under the guidance of the clergy—the gradual Catholicization of civil society. From this perspective, the chosen path had been that—required, moreover, by the agreements of September 1931 that had put an end to the conflict with the regime—of confining it to an increasingly exclusive religious and pietistic sphere, which, on the one hand, facilitated grassroots proselytism and, on the other, made it —if you'll pardon the term—a sort of large "refrigerator" in which militant Catholics (membership in Catholic Action numbered about one million in the early 1930s) would not run the risk of being tainted by Fascism and, indeed, would strengthen their identity as Catholics while, at the same time, awaiting, as "good Italian citizens," "better times," while in the meantime forming their own ruling class capable, in the future—depending on how the situation developed—either of outright replacing the regime's ruling class (the

optimal solution, which largely came to pass after World War II) or of providing the latter with a whole range of technical skills firmly grounded in Catholic principles, so as to counter fascist hegemony in civil society. Obviously, in such a strategy, the roles of the various organizations that made up Catholic Action differed, and the most important ones inevitably ended up being those of the organizations working with the younger generations: the GIAC, the FUCI, and the Movement of Catholic Graduates. These were precisely the organizations that the regime viewed with the greatest suspicion and hostility, considering them competitors to its own youth organizations. Furthermore, it was precisely these organizations (FUCI and the Graduates' Movement) that—due to their approach to the reality of Catholicism and modern society, as well as the influence of some of their leaders—adopted a more nuanced attitude toward the regime compared to other Catholic Action organizations: in some groups (a minority and, generally, more closely tied to popular tradition), characterized by an anti-fascist stance; in others (the majority), marked—as has been noted 324 —by a sort of ambivalence, which often led them to avoid the common terms of reference of pro-fascism and anti-fascism, to seek their own independent position, and to oppose—or at least resist—the decision by the hierarchy and the Holy See to limit the scope of their activities to the religious and devotional sphere.

Given this situation, the years immediately following 1931 were characterized, on the one hand, by the persistence within fascism—especially in the provinces—of a climate of latent suspicion and hostility (punctuated by a few incidents) toward Catholic Action and, on the other hand, by a certain tension between the hierarchy and the Holy See on the one hand, and Catholic Action—and in particular the FUCI and the Laureati—on the other. By around 1934, however, things had changed. This was partly due to the renewal of most of the top leadership positions in Catholic Action (the appointment of L. Gedda as president of the GIAC was of particular importance) with men fully aligned with the positions of the Holy See and, at the same time, difficult for Fascism to attack, and partly as a result of a significant easing (at least apparent) of Fascist suspicion and hostility; and largely because, benefiting from the broader climate of Catholic revival that the Church had managed to foster after the Conciliation, the various branches of Catholic Action had also experienced a growing organizational resurgence (difficult to quantify based on current research, but which, on average, can be estimated at around thirtyto forty percent increase in membership over a five-year period) and in influence, settling —as far as relations with the regime were concerned—into a very particular position that must be clearly understood if one is to grasp the subsequent developments of this new situation. With the exception of a certain number of cases of outright anti-fascism—which, moreover, were increasingly rare and confined almost exclusively to older members of the Popular Party—this position was in fact characterized both by a gradual rapprochement with and acceptance of the regime, which obviously took different forms, ranging from anti-fascism to pro-fascism (including a certain number of memberships in the PNF, the GUF, and the ONB—some of which were opportunistic, while others were not)—depending on local and family traditions, specific influences, and personal inclinations regarding the various aspects of the fascist reality; it was also characterized, however, by a detachment and very often by a marked rejection of those more strictly fascist aspects of the regime that directly or indirectly conflicted with religious values and Catholic culture (in the broad sense). Consequently, this placed a limit on their engagement with and acceptance of the regime—a limit that could be crossed only at the cost of abandoning Catholicism. This translated, at the time, into a substantial failure to integrate into the regime and a greater ease, compared to the rest of Italians, in finding refuge in private life; for while the latter had only their families—and these families alone had to bear the full brunt of the surrounding public oppression— militant Catholics, in addition to their families, also had their community—parochial or otherwise—surrounding them 325. The moment of greatest balance between the two sides of this position—and, therefore, of rapprochement and acquiescence toward the regime—was reached in 1936, on the occasion of the conquest of Ethiopia, coinciding or nearly coinciding with the first signs within Fascist circles of the looming new crisis with Catholic Action. Once this moment

had passed, the second aspect would, in general, become the one that increasingly characterized Italian Catholics.

As we have already noted, it would be incorrect to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the concerns and discontent aroused among Catholics by the first signs of Fascist Italy's rapprochement with Nazi Germany and the first signs of a resurgence of hostility on the part of the Fascists toward Catholic Action. Compared to the crisis of '38, those concerns and that discontent—as well as the subsequent hostility toward racial legislation—were, we repeat, merely contributing and secondary factors. To understand the crisis, one must look to other motivations—partly the same ones that had led to the crisis of '31, and partly new ones, closely linked to the "totalitarian turn" of the second half of the 1930s and the "cultural revolution" that formed its foundation.

An early manifestation can certainly be identified in the resurgence that Catholic Action had begun to experience toward the end of the first half of the 1930s and in the Fascist reactions to it. Already serious in and of itself—since it demonstrated that the success achieved in '31 had served almost solely to inflict a setback on the Catholic organization, not to bring about its decline, and, in particular, that the diocesan structure imposed on Catholic Action at that time, rather than dismantling the Catholic organization, had actually strengthened and centralized it, turning ecclesiastical assistants into a sort of prefects through whom the Holy See pulled the strings of everything—this resurgence was, in the eyes of the regime, made even more serious by the manner in which it was carried out and by the fact that it appeared to be part of a broader strategy implemented by the Church through the Conciliation, which manifested itself in a thousand ways, including "the development of private schools, campaigns for the Catholic daily newspaper and to *"conquer"* radio and cinema, the spread of recreation centers and parish halls, and the proliferation of periodicals, including not only local publications but also those aimed at women, families, children, etc." 326 and clearly indicated a deliberate intent to penetrate and permeate every aspect of Italian society, extending the Church's influence far beyond its traditional spheres of influence. In this context, the revival of Catholic Action was unacceptable to Fascism—not only in cases where it entailed a limited rapprochement with the regime, but also in cases of a substantial rapprochement, given that it would have taken too long for such a rapprochement to become complete, and there was no certainty that new developments might not interrupt the process of rapprochement or even cause it to regress. What was particularly unacceptable to the regime was: 1) that Catholic Action tended to extend beyond the parish sphere and undertake public mass initiatives (rallies, pilgrimages, etc.), as if to flaunt its strength; 2) that the revival primarily concerned youth organizations and thus occurred at the expense of sectors that were particularly dear to Fascism (Gedda's establishment of the "luniores" groups carried considerable weight in this regard, as it was seen as aimed at countering the spread of the Balilla); 3) that it regained influence among the working class—another highly sensitive and challenging sector in which Fascism was unwilling to tolerate competitors; 4) that Catholic Action not only competed with the regime's parallel organizations but - while generally careful not to give space to anti-fascist elements - instill in its members a polemical stance that purported to target certain immoral aspects of modern society, but which in practice often ended up targeting Fascism itself, and foster in them a "dual loyalty" that was by no means free of polemical undertones toward the regime. Typical in this regard is the irritation caused by the wording of the pledge taken by GIAC members, which called on them to "always work for the good and true greatness of the Fatherland": for many fascists, this was a veritable oath; the word "true" fundamentally challenged the regime's policies and revealed the true sentiments of the leaders of Catholic Action—and, therefore, of the Church.

A rich and eloquent collection of documents 327 shows how the developments of this new situation were, from the very moment they first emerged, followed by the regime with the utmost attention; it

also reveals how these developments led to the spread, among Fascist leaders, of the conviction that something resembling a potential Catholic party was taking shape—one that, under certain conditions—could have transformed into a full-fledged party. However, there is no evidence, up until the end of the war in Africa, of any initiatives by the regime to counter the revival of Catholic Action, unless one considers that the October 1935 amendment to the regulations governing rural credit unions—in addition to being part of the now decade-long Fascist policy of controlling Catholic banks 328—was also intended to reduce Catholic Action's sources of local funding. Nor should this come as a surprise, given the sensitivity of the moment. As soon as the conflict ended, however, a first step was taken in the form of a diplomatic note, in which a series of events deemed not entirely in harmony with the 1931 agreements were brought to the attention of the Holy See. The Secretariat of State replied in turn with a note that was quite conciliatory in form but which, in substance, meticulously refuted all the charges leveled against Catholic Action.[329] For the time being, the matter seemed settled. In early 1937, however, the Holy See announced an upcoming restructuring of the Central Office and the Diocesan Sub-Secretariats of Catholic Action 330, which, as has been rightly noted331, constituted "a substantial modification to the statutes of December 1931, which, based on the September agreement [with the regime], had established the diocesan structure of Catholic Action and, consequently, the reduction of the Central Office's role; and it was, in effect, a return to the system that had emerged from the 1923 reform, with the addition of a number of bodies and functions not provided for in the old statutes." In practice, it was a restoration of the situation that had contributed to the outbreak of the crisis of '31 and that the agreements following it had sought to eliminate. And, moving from the organizational level to that of concrete activity, shortly thereafter the governing bodies of Catholic Action established the "common theme" on which all organizations were to focus their activities in 1937–38, choosing a theme—"morality"—whose ideological and, to some extent, political implications are all too evident. All the more so because the program of activities also included an analysis of the religious community—something the parish priest had, in fact, always done—but which now took on an unprecedented systematic nature and involved the use of the Catholic laity and the coordination of information through a news office. Parish offices thus became instruments of "moral"—and, therefore, indirectly, parapolitical—control over families, similar to those of the Fascists.

330 When the Central Office was established in 1938, Cardinal Pizzardo, who headed it, sought to downplay its importance, assuring the ambassador to the Holy See, Pignatti, that it was merely an information office for Catholic Action organizations worldwide. Reporting these statements to Palazzo Chigi (on April 1, 1938), Pignatti advised "waiting to see" and predicted possible friction between Pizzardo and the Secretariat of State, which, in his view, "was not pleased to see Catholic Action taken away from it," asae, Holy See, b. 38 (1938), phase 2, "Activities of the Clergy and Catholic Action."

From this perspective, the very terminology used by Catholic leaders echoed modes of expression typical of fascism:

"One of the most pressing goals of Catholic Action is the Christian restoration of the family: it therefore calls upon its various members, provides them with a comprehensive formation within the associations, and then returns them to the family so that the family, as such, and as the primary social unit, may pay due homage to Christ, the Divine King" 332.

It is difficult to say what motives led Catholic Action—that is, the Holy See—to take such explosive initiatives. Rogati, to whom we owe the best study on the crisis of '38, wrote 333:

It seems that, faced with the regime's increased ideological aggression, Catholics sought to close ranks

by focusing precisely on that institution—the family—which is the traditional repository of Catholic culture and way of life, the counterweight to fascist statism.

The explanation is compelling, but insufficient. Among other things, it does not explain why the Holy See took a step, such as the restructuring of the Central Office—a move that effectively put an end to the diocesan structure of Catholic Action, reinforced suspicions that it was intended to become a potential political party, and was therefore highly likely to be interpreted by the fascist regime not only as a violation of the September 1931 agreements but as a genuine act of hostility. Moreover, this move was unprecedented in its modus operandi, ran counter to the Holy See's traditional caution and its care to avoid clashes with the regime, and, above all, appeared to have no justification, given that—as already noted—the disadvantages of the diocesan structure had in fact already been largely neutralized through the intermediary role of the ecclesiastical assistants, all of whom reported directly to the Vatican. Above all, such an explanation presupposes that the Holy See felt strong enough to engage in a show of force—which is unthinkable. To fully answer this question, we believe it is necessary to look beyond the idea of a mere response to the growing "ideological aggression" of fascism. One hypothesis could be that the operation was hastily put together in anticipation of Mussolini's possible retirement or even death, and thus the need to be in the best possible position at the time of succession—both to influence it and to deal with any negative outcomes. This hypothesis is not entirely far-fetched given the "Duce's" state of health in the second half of 1936, and it could be supported by the fact that Fanno, after —when it had by then become clear that the issue of Mussolini's succession was by no means imminent—the Holy See became much more cautious, and Cardinal Pizzardo, to whom Catholic Action reported, issued directives aimed at making the outward aspects of Catholic Action's organizational revival and resumption of activities less conspicuous and, thus, at avoiding the confrontation that was taking shape with the 3M regime. All things considered, while we do not rule out this hypothesis entirely (nor do we rule out the possibility that both factors were at play), we nevertheless consider another scenario more likely. Namely, that the Holy See was practically forced to abandon its usual caution and act out of the necessity to better control Catholic Action in order to avert the danger that the rapprochement with and support for the regime—which had taken hold within it in recent years and reached its peak with the victorious conclusion of the Ethiopian conflict—might increase even further and set in motion, especially among young people, a process of actual fascistization. All the more so because this hypothesis is supported by the way in which the "common theme" for 1937–38 was almost always implemented: not only in terms of moral and cultural education, but above all through efforts aimed at keeping members—and young people in particular—within the parish framework (by strengthening recreational and associative activities there) and preventing them from participating in any form of entertainment (dancing was particularly targeted) or "secular" activities, especially—though this was obviously not stated publicly—if organized by the Fascists (in addition to youth organizations, the campaign often targeted the Dopolavoro). One example —likely an extreme case due to the lack of caution in the language used (so much so that Starace used it as a pretext to report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that "in recent times… in some provinces there have been outright deviations on the part of the Catholic Action youth associations," resulting in a "tightening of the reins by the local [Fascist] hierarchy," and to request that the matter be brought to the Vatican's attention 336), but certainly not an isolated one—judging at least by the various other cases noted by the authorities and often reported by the local Fascist press—an illustration of how this campaign was conducted is provided by what the "Bollettino della Parrocchia di S. M. in Albino Bergamasco" wrote on August 8, 1937, with reference to the summer season:

335 The campaign against dances took on a harsh tone in some central and northern regions, and especially in Romagna, sparking heated controversies in the local press (for example, in Ravenna between the fascist weekly "Santa Milizia" and the Catholic weekly "Il Romagnolo") and even

prompting several articles in the “Osservatore Romano” (“Against Silence” and “Fruit of Every Season,” published on January 27 and March 9, 1938, respectively). Commenting on these events with Ciano on July 5, 1938, Mussolini observed: “The priests are deluding themselves if they believe they have a positive influence in Italy. All it took was for a priest in Verona—a Catholic province—to ban dancing for all the young people to desert the churches and flock to the dance halls” (G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 156).

Parish services, Mass, and catechism classes are becoming increasingly deserted, and we deplore the fact that Sundays and holy days of obligation are being improperly turned into days of revelry, of entertainment that is not always wholesome, of gatherings and outings that follow one another without interruption: in short, into days of sin. [Therefore, we remind you] that [members of congregations and associations], just as they may not attend shows, movies, variety performances, etc., outside of our organizations, so too may they not participate in more or less organized outings.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that one of the causes of the crisis of ’38 was the concern and irritation aroused in Fascism by the revival and growth of Catholic Action and by the Church’s increasingly evident commitment to expanding its presence throughout the country, to the point of establishing something very similar to the embryo of a political party. Ciano’s diary entry 337 is clear on this point: Mussolini saw “in the work carried out by Catholic Action an attempt to establish a full-fledged political party, which, anticipating difficult times for Fascism, aims to be ready to take over,” and his irritation had reached (by the end of 1937) such a point that he declared himself “ready to bring out the truncheons against the priests.” Nor should this seem to contradict what we have just said regarding the growing Catholic rapprochement with and support for the regime, for this was certainly not enough for Fascism, especially in the climate of the “totalitarian turn” it had initiated precisely during that period. And this is precisely where the second cause of the crisis comes in—the one that in fact made it even more severe than that of ’31 (even if it lacked the latter’s public drama)—and which, on the one hand, makes the substantial defeat Mussolini suffered on this occasion appear even more serious (since he had to resign himself to de facto accepting the continuation of the situation he had, in fact, wanted to bring to an end) and, on the other hand, explains the much smaller impact that the crisis of ’38 nevertheless had compared to that of ’31: back then, Fascism, as the victor, had every interest in exploiting it to the fullest; now, having been defeated, it preferred to sweep it under the rug, aided in this by the Church, which—satisfied with its success and concerned about other aspects of Mussolini’s policies —was in turn interested in accommodating the “Duce” so as not to play into the hands of those fascists (such as Farinacci and Starace 338) who were fanning the flames and were ready, in order to push him toward an alliance with Hitler, to use the argument that, by doing so, they might also be able to take their revenge on the Church.

We have already seen how Mussolini had been convinced for several years that the Church could not provide effective support for the regime 339. If we add to this the fact that it did not even benefit him economically[340] and—far more decisively—that the facts demonstrated to him that on virtually all major domestic and international issues, the Church was moving along strategic lines that were antithetical to or at least divergent from his own (the only real points of agreement remained those concerning the fight against urbanization and, partially, regarding population growth[341] and anti-communism—even though, on this last point, there were instances, at least abroad, that cast some doubt on the monolithic nature of the Catholics’ anti-communist commitment[342])—it is easy to imagine how strongly he was driven by the idea of curtailing Catholic Action and thereby demonstrating that not even the Church could oppose him with impunity. To fully grasp the significance for Mussolini of the 1938 clash with the Church—first over Catholic Action and then over racial legislation—it is

necessary, however, to place these events within a broader context than the immediately political one; they must be viewed from the dual perspective of the “cultural revolution” and the “Duce’s” personal stance toward Catholicism.

338 The Holy See considered Starace a “dangerous pagan” (ibid., p. 227) and believed (or, so as not to confront Mussolini too directly, tended to give the impression) that “the tendency to crack down ever more heavily on Catholics” depended, rather than on the government, on the “hostile stance that the Party seems intent on adopting toward the Catholic Church”. See ASAE, Holy See, b. 38 (1938), file 2 “Activities of the Clergy and Catholic Action,” report by Ambassador Pignatti dated December 24, 1938.

341 It is significant that at the only major public clerical-Fascist rally of this period—held on January 9, 1938, at Palazzo Venezia to honor the clergy who had won the national wheat competitions organized by the newspaper *Italia e Fede*— Mussolini—speaking to two thousand priests, including sixty bishops and archbishops—limited his call for those present to contribute to the regime’s policy to just two areas: the fight against urbanization and “the numerical growth of the Italian people.” See Mussolini, XXIX, pp. 48 ff.

Regarding the Holy See’s attitude toward the Communist Party’s “outstretched hand” policy toward Catholics, see T., “Words of a Father and the Firmness of a Shepherd,” in *L’Osservatore Romano*, December 28, 1937.

Given what we have already said about the characteristics of the “totalitarian turn” and the “cultural revolution,” as far as the former is concerned, the discussion can be kept to a minimum. A statement by Mussolini, reported by Ciano in his diary under the date of September 4, 1938, p. 343, is practically sufficient to bring into focus the pedagogical and cultural significance that the conflict acquired for him in this regard:

I am accustoming Italians to the idea that we can do without one more thing: the Vatican... The struggle against these great forces—at least as many perceive them—serves to strengthen the backbone of the Italian people. And it also serves to show that certain mountains are nothing more than blisters.

The issue regarding Mussolini’s personal stance is more complex. In Ciano’s diary, under the date of February 9, 1939 3, there is an entry: “For some time now, Mussolini has been displaying an increasingly clear detachment from matters concerning the Church. It was not always so”—which it would be wrong to interpret solely in a political sense, especially since it finds a non-political confirmation in a statement made by Mussolini himself to A. Pavolini a few months later: “I am moving ever closer to heresy” 345. A fervent anticlericalist (to the point of adopting attitudes that might suggest a substantial, if rudimentary, atheism 346) in his youth, Mussolini for many years—roughly until the early 1930s—had viewed religion and the Church almost exclusively in immediately political terms, seeking to use them to advance his power. During these years, he had certainly not abandoned (even if he did not display it) his anticlericalism, but—partly due to a process of inner maturation and largely due to the influence of his brother, who, in contrast, was a sincere believer—he had arrived, through his personal religious struggle, at a position that cannot be described as atheistic. We will discuss this and its further developments in the final years of Mussolini’s life in the next volume; as far as the issues we are addressing here are concerned, it suffices to focus on just one aspect: his absolute alienation from Christianity and, indeed, his radical rejection of it.

Toward the end of 1919, Mussolini had written in *Il popolo d'Italia*[347]:

We, who detest all forms of Christianity from the depths of our being—from that of Jesus to that of Marx—view with extraordinary sympathy this "revival" of modern life in the pagan forms of the cult of strength and audacity.

Almost twenty years later, speaking with N. D'Aroma 348, he said:

You're all little Christians! You have to live as if you were never going to die. Only in this way can you leave the longest mark and build for all time.

These two statements, so to speak, summarize the reasons for Mussolini's "moral" opposition to Christianity and—despite his view of it as a form of paganized Christianity 349—to Catholicism, which he regarded as "a pernicious doctrine of renunciation and humiliation" 350 that corrupted and emasculated men and peoples (and in particular the Italian people, who, due to the universality of the Roman Church, had failed to acquire a true national character of their own 351) and deprived them of the desire and ability to engage in earthly life, to fight for it, and to live it with the identification and joy that alone could translate into collective passion, strength, and audacity. As can be seen, these reasons were by no means original; at their root lay a mixture of cultural influences that are so obvious they are not worth dwelling on (except to mention one that is generally overlooked but which, on the contrary, must be kept in mind for virtually all of Mussolini's positions that in any way concerned Christianity, both as a social phenomenon and as a historical fact within the framework of Roman civilization: Paolo Orano's *Christ and Quirino* 352) and characteristics of a certain polemic against Christianity that was far from marginal in the decades straddling the turn of the century—precisely those in which Mussolini was largely shaped—but which clearly explain why the "Duce," now entirely focused on inspiring and imposing upon Italians—and young people in particular—a collective morality of "virtue" and civic "sacrifice," considered the Catholic religion and, therefore, the Church not only a political obstacle but also an ideological enemy—the most formidable of those still present in Italy—and could not wait to defeat it.

350 He had expressed himself in these terms in 1904 in Switzerland, when he still had no qualms about speaking his mind, taking the floor in a debate with E. Vandervelde. See C. Delcroix, *Un uomo e un popolo*, Florence 1928, pp. 71 ff., as well as E. Vandervelde, "Quando Mussolini mi faceva il contraddittorio," in *Il nuovo Avanti*, February 12, 1938.

That said, it must also be noted that, even while considering the Church a "blister" and the Italians a fundamentally anticlerical and Ghibelline people—for whom it was enough to "scratch the surface" and set the tone to unleash all their latent anticlericalism,[353] Mussolini did not underestimate his adversary 354 and was well aware of the difficulties that a clash with the Church would have caused him at that time. For this reason, he was highly critical ("It is idiotic and useless, and it makes the Axis unpopular among the Italian Catholic masses" 355) of the Nazis for the fight against Catholicism they had undertaken 356; he wanted to avoid—for the time being—a head-on confrontation and preferred, in the meantime, maneuver through internal channels, limiting himself to curtailing Catholic Action through a widespread campaign of attrition, aimed at intimidating its members, forcing them onto the defensive, and, if possible, causing them to break away from their organizations.

With this in mind, the dynamics of the 1938 crisis become clear. In particular, one can understand why the Fascists responded not with large-scale action and authoritative public attacks in the national press, as in 1931, but with a series of local initiatives and actions aimed at intensifying controls and the

traditional petty harassment of Catholic organizations of all kinds (even the centers run by the "Protezione della Gioventù" at railway stations were targeted, forcing them to operate only through members of the PNF and in the "prescribed" uniform 357), so as to make their lives difficult, with) during strictly religious services in church, in actual processions, and on sacred pilgrimages where and when they are fully gathered in their groups;

353 "If the Pope keeps talking, I'll scratch the surface of the Italians and in no time at all I'll turn them back into anticlericals" (G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 167, dated August 22, 1938).

354 "I do not underestimate his [the Pope's] strength, but he must not underestimate mine. The example of 1931 teaches us this. A mere nod from me would be enough to unleash all the anticlericalism of this people..." (ibid., pp. 163 ff., dated August 8, 1938).

355 Ibid., p. 202, dated October 27, 1938, as well as pp. 212 ff. (November 13, 1938): "The Duce… says that any violence against the clergy and churches makes the Axis unpopular, and that if an open crisis were to arise and Catholicism were to suffer the same fate as the Jews, the Axis would hardly be able to hold out." And again on p. 223.

356 It is highly significant that, after an article by a Dominican friar appeared in the English Catholic magazine *The Tablet* on June 26, 1937—in which he defined fascism as "an authentic pagan statolatry, in blatant contrast to the natural rights of the family and the supernatural rights of the Church" and placed fascism and Nazism on the same level in this regard— Minister Alfieri intervened directly with Father Tacchi Venturi, securing a response from the Vatican Secretariat of State to the Archbishop of Westminster and the Master General of the Order of Preachers, instructing them to point out to the author of the article the error of treating the two regimes "on an equal footing and inflicting the same strong condemnation" upon them, ACS, Min. Popular Culture, b. 119, file 15.

357 In the second half of May 1938, the Ministry of the Interior sent the following strictly confidential circular (partially cited by S. Rogari, *Azione Cattolica e Fascismo*, op. cit., II, p. 341) to all prefects, through which it centralized all oversight of the "political activity of the clergy" within the General Directorate of Religious Affairs: "The Ministry has identified the need for greater coordination, coupled with a broader expansion of the political-ecclesiastical intelligence service.

"As a first step toward achieving this goal, it is appropriate that the Prefectures—regardless of the communications normally sent to other offices of the Ministry of the Interior or to other ministries—forward, with due promptness and accompanied by the relevant notes and observations, to the General Directorate of Religious Affairs copies of Catholic press publications of any kind (daily newspapers, weeklies, diocesan and parish bulletins, pastoral letters, books, magazines, pamphlets, etc.) that might serve as a pretext for further intimidation, harassment, and even the use of force. Among the most common pretexts were the public display of "uniforms," flags, and badges 358; holding lectures on topics not exclusively religious in nature; and engaging in propaganda against participation in the cultural, recreational, and sporting initiatives of the PNF, the GIL, and the OND, thereby revealing their "bitterness" toward the regime 359. At the same time, these documents may be of particular interest for the references to political matters—both domestic and international—contained within them.

"It is also necessary that all events of significant importance concerning the clergy's attitude and its political implications—and, above all, those likely to influence relations between ecclesiastical authorities and administrative and political authorities—be the subject of special, detailed reports to the aforementioned General Directorate, highlighting any abnormal situations that may have arisen both at

the central level and in the periphery, along with their causes. Above all, it will be of particular interest to receive frequent and detailed reports on the activities of Catholic Action and on any repercussions of such activities on local political life.

“It is also necessary that a copy of all communications addressed to other offices of the Ministry of the Interior or to other ministries be sent simultaneously to the General Directorate of Religious Affairs for information, when their content relates to the political activities of the clergy.”

358 The issue of badges dragged on until almost the eve of Italy’s entry into the war. On May 11, 1940, Buffarini-Guidi informed the prefects and the relevant directorates-general of the Ministry of the Interior of the terms of the agreement reached on the matter between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Holy See (ACS, Min. Interior, Gen. Dir. PS, Div. of General Affairs and Resources [1920–1945], G. 1, b. 146): “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has communicated the text of the agreement with the Holy See regarding the use of Catholic Action insignia.

“This text is hereby transcribed in accordance with Your Excellencies’ instructions, and you are requested to issue the corresponding instructions to the relevant agencies.

“1) The Catholic Action badge may be worn:

b} at meetings, conferences, retreats, or during spiritual exercises of the members of Italian Catholic Action; at celebrations and award ceremonies for catechesis and religious culture organized by Italian Catholic Action for its members, provided that these take place at the very premises of the Catholic Action associations and, when held outdoors, the location and the gathering itself are clearly specified.

“ 2) To avoid misunderstandings, it should be added that the rules provided must be interpreted literally and that, therefore, members of Catholic Action associations, under the supervision of their leaders, will limit—also to prevent the recurrence of unpleasant incidents—the use of the Catholic Action badge during the functions or events indicated above; they must not, therefore, wear it when traveling to or from such events individually.”

Pending the agreement, in 1938, the central secretariat of the GIAC (and probably also those of the other branches of Catholic Action) had issued the following instruction on the matter (GIAC Archives, “Confidential”): “Young people should not wear the badge during military-style meetings, at patriotic and civic events, or at Party headquarters. Furthermore, should they be asked to remove the badge outside the Association, they should not object, without making a fuss about it. In fact, diplomatic efforts are underway to ensure that wearing the badge is permitted in all other circumstances.” *

359 Typical in this regard is the following excerpt from a report on a sermon (which sparked a heated incident between the Holy See and the Italian authorities in November–December 1937) delivered by the parish priest of Albano Laziale, Don Cesare Guerrucci, who, following the sermon, was detained for several hours by the police: “The parish priest, Father Guerrucci, with a carelessness surprising in a priest who, by innate or acquired disposition, is always vigilant and prudent, has once again confirmed—after the unequivocal evidence already provided—his animosity and aversion toward the Regime and its affiliated organizations.

“He began by noting the successful outcome of the lecture series, which drew an average of 350 young people per evening, attributing this result to the marvelous propaganda methods of Catholic Action:

methods, he said verbatim, that are not based on violence, coercion, or mobilization notices, but rather on spontaneity. And he continued: ‘all applications (including those in the normal processing stage) for membership in the National Fascist Party (PNF) submitted by members of Catholic Action were blocked, and a campaign—part persuasion and part intimidation—was launched to discourage new enrollments in Catholic Action organizations (especially the youth groups) and to induce those who were already members to leave them, often —especially in areas where Catholic Action was strongest —to effectively raise the issue of the incompatibility between membership in Fascist organizations and membership in Catholic ones and, as a result, to pressure those who found themselves in that situation to resign from the Catholic organizations, especially if they were individuals—and in particular young people—who held positions of some prominence within them.

By early 1938, this action and the reactions it had provoked among Catholics had by then led to such a series of tensions and incidents 360 that Buffarini-Guidi would say the situation was becoming worse than that of 1931. And, in fact, in the very first days of January 1938, on the 5th, the Pope, through Father Tacchi Venturi, took an extremely forceful stance against Mussolini. The note opened with an affirmation of the religious duties of Catholic Action that left no doubt regarding Pius XI’s decision to defend it at all costs:362

We have repeatedly defined Catholic Action as the participation of the laity in the hierarchical apostolate of the Church. The hierarchy absolutely needs this valuable assistance from the laity to fulfill its mission and achieve its spiritual goals in individuals, in the family, and in society. The Apostles themselves, in the early spread of the Gospel, insistently sought this help from young people, laypeople, and women. Subsequently, this collaboration of the laity continued uninterrupted (albeit in various forms) throughout the centuries, always sought and graciously welcomed by bishops and priests. The Supreme Pontiffs, especially the young, flock to it because they understand that civilization, religion, and the Fatherland are defended—more than by weapons—through their constant profession of faith and by remaining pure and strong.”

“From now on, I will gather these young people—who are all too caught up in partisanship—more often, and I will oversee their spiritual education, for it is not only through the sword that a strong youth can be given to the Fatherland.”

“He concluded by inviting parents to send their children to the Church, for it is only the Church that can educate them spiritually.”

“He concluded by reminding everyone that on Sunday, the 28th of this month, at 4:00 p.m., again in the town hall, there will be a learned and important anti-blasphemy lecture to be given by the Honorable Mario Cingolani. He earnestly urged everyone to spread the word so that the event would be a resounding success.”

“In this regard, he noted that while the Penal Code imposes extremely severe penalties on those who offend His Majesty the King-Emperor and the Duce, it does not punish those who blaspheme the Virgin” (ASAE, Holy See, b. 38 [1938], file 2, “Activities of the Clergy and Catholic Action”),

For these, see the documentation examined in the various essays of a local nature collected in the volume *Church, Catholic Action, and Fascism in Northern Italy during the Pontificate of Pius XI (1922–1939)*, edited by P. Pecorari, Milan 1979.

In fact, over the past century, they have persistently called for it, as the needs of the Christian people

have increased, especially due to the bitterest consequences that liberalism and socialism have brought upon the Christian spirit.

Catholic Action, understood in this way, is today established in all nations where the providential mission of the Church is not misunderstood; it is desired and vigorously promoted by the entire episcopate as a necessary means for the salvation of souls...

The Church and the Pope cannot, therefore, renounce Catholic Action without failing in their own mission; to fight against and undermine the existence and development of Catholic Action is to fight against and undermine the very life of the Church.

This was followed by some more conciliatory passages: it was emphasized that Catholic Action, "by forming deeply Christian consciences—and thus consciences that love order, work, sacrifice, and discipline," contributed to the peace and prosperity of the nation and "to keeping alive a genuine love of country," and it was stated that they were "always willing to loyally accept any reports or observations that might in any way disturb our good relations with the Duce and his senior ministers" and to examine them calmly "to reach an amicable and satisfactory solution." But in cauda venenum; in the closing paragraph, in fact, the tone became not only uncompromising but clearly threatening, even hinting—albeit in an extremely convoluted and indirect manner—at the ultimate weapon remaining to the Church should the regime not change course: excommunication:

And here, on this last point, it is of the utmost importance to us to implore His Excellency the Head of Government—who has rendered such meritorious service to Italy and, it may be said, to the entire world through the resolute stance he has taken against communism and socialism—to give the most careful consideration to the immense damage that would befall Italy, which is so dear to us, not least because it is our homeland, should it ever happen (may God never allow it) that the distressing conditions we deplored with the deepest regret and the utmost solemnity in June 1931 were to be established. For in such a case, the peaceful state of affairs that has prevailed for nearly seven years between the Vatican and the Regime would come to an end—a state that has brought no small benefit and glory to Fascism and infinite distress to anti-Fascists throughout the world, who desire nothing more and strive for nothing less than for the Vatican to excommunicate both sides.

At the time, the Pope's move did not seem to have any obvious effect. In fact, incidents of intolerance, intimidation, and at times violence continued, and the situation seemed, in fact, to be worsening due to Farinacci's personal intervention; in three successive articles published in May in *Il regime fascista* 363, he accused Catholic organizations of adopting an attitude "in complete contrast to the directives and spirit of the Fascist Party," of straying from the strictly religious sphere assigned to them and encroaching on other spheres that were, in fact, off-limits to them, and of still harboring within their ranks many "old remnants of the former Popular Party"; he also raised the issue of the incompatibility between membership in the PNF and in Catholic Action. In reality, the uncompromising tone of the papal note had made Mussolini realize the gravity of the risk of further escalating the campaign against Catholic Action at such a delicate moment for the regime and on the eve of probable new sources of tension with the Church (due to the onset of the anti-Semitic phase of racial policy) and had led him to initiate highly confidential contacts with the Church to find a solution to the crisis.

The information available on these contacts is extremely scarce and quite vague. What can be said, however, is that 1) the negotiations must have been extremely difficult, both because of the "Duce's" need to save face, because the Holy See must have clearly realized that, in reality, Mussolini was seeking an armistice rather than an agreement, and, finally, because not everyone in the Vatican shared

the line of extreme intransigence adopted by Pius XI; 2) two external factors must have played a significant role in bringing the negotiations to a successful conclusion. The first was a new outburst by Farinacci, on July 22,[3] which clearly revealed the leader of the intransigent faction's intention to launch a campaign (which would certainly have put the Holy See in a difficult position, but perhaps Mussolini even more so) against the "relics" of the Popular Party present in Catholic Action—a campaign that would undoubtedly have found widespread support among the peripheral Fasci and would certainly have provoked new and more serious incidents. The second and even more important event (so much so that the Ministries of the Interior and Popular Culture did their utmost to prevent its dissemination through the press, going so far as to block its publication in diocesan bulletins 363) was the

365 The ban on publishing the Pope's speech prompted a note from the Secretary of State to Ambassador Pignatti, in which Cardinal Pacelli described the ban as a violation of the Concordat. The report in which the ambassador to the Holy See recounted the exchange was forwarded, among others, to the Ministry of the Interior, which replied on August 23, signed by Buffarini-Guidi, in the following terms: "The prefectural measures referred to in the note from the Royal Ambassador to the Holy See, as reported in the telegram to which we are replying, were evidently determined by specific local political considerations, as no provision has been issued by the Royal Government on this matter, specifically with regard to the diocesan bulletins, which are organs of the episcopal curias.

"The observation made by His Eminence the Cardinal Secretary of State, however, provides an opportunity to examine the issue in its broader and more general terms, namely from the perspective of the scope and limits of application of what was agreed upon and stipulated in Article 2, paragraph 11, of the Concordat with the Holy See. This matter has already been discussed with the Ministry of Popular Culture following the publication in some diocesan bulletins of articles of a political nature or even of a general nature, which, in any case, seemed more appropriately suited to ordinary publications subject to the press law.

"Now, the two Ministries—the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Popular Culture—have agreed that the right to free publication, as referred to in the aforementioned provision of the Concordat, cannot be understood as extending beyond acts concerning the spiritual governance of the faithful; and such acts do not include statements of an essentially or predominantly political nature, however lofty the address delivered by the Pope on July 28 to the students of the College of Propaganda Fide. The speech is remembered above all because it was during this address that Pius XI emphasized how racism was foreign to Italian tradition and, for the first time, criticized Italy (following the communiqué issued three days earlier in which, as we shall see, the PNF had endorsed and adopted the manifesto of the racist "scientists") for having imitated Germany in this sphere as well 366. In reality, the speech holds greater significance precisely in relation to the issue of Catholic Action, since it was in this address that the pope publicly repeated the threat he had already made in private on January 5, warning that one must take issue with the Church, not with Catholic Action: otherwise, it amounts to hypocrisy that may conceal the insidious intent of those who would strike at Catholic Action without striking at the Church. No, that is not possible: whoever strikes at Catholic Action strikes at the Church, because they strike at Catholic life; the connection is therefore clear: whoever strikes at Catholic Action strikes at the Pope... I urge you not to attack Catholic Action; I urge you, I beg you for your own good, because whoever attacks Catholic Action attacks the Pope, and whoever attacks the Pope dies.

If, after the events of January 5, Mussolini might still have harbored some doubts about the Pope's actual determination to go to any lengths—even to the bitter end—to defend Catholic Action, after these words he could no longer have any doubts. Convinced—rightly so—that, if he continued down

the path he had taken, a clash over Catholic Action would be inevitable, whereas on the issue of race the Holy See's position was less intransigent and more marked by internal divisions, he concealed his retreat from public opinion and intransigent fascism by focusing entirely on the issue of race. Three days later, speaking in Forlì to a group of federalists, he thundered his reply[36'7]:

Let it be known—and let everyone know—that even on the issue of race, we will press ahead. To say that Fascism has imitated someone or something is simply absurd.

regardless of the body from which they emanate. In such a case, it seems that the guarantees set forth in the Concordat could no longer be invoked; rather, the matter would fall within the ordinary scope of the provisions regulating the press, with all the logical and inevitable consequences, when the content of the publication is found to conflict with certain—albeit temporary—domestic and international requirements. Nor, on the other hand, would a different course of action be possible in this delicate matter without failing to fulfill one of the State's fundamental duties, connected with the exercise of its sovereign rights.

"It appears that, in a similar vein, appropriate communications could be made to the Holy See, expressing, in conclusion, that the terms set forth above constitute the exact interpretation, in letter and spirit, of Article 2, paragraph 11, of the Concordat, to which the Royal Government has consistently adhered and intends to continue adhering in the future" (ASAE, Holy See, b. 38 [1938], file.

For aspects concerning the racial issue, see R. De Felice, *History of the Italian Jews under Fascism*, Turin 1972, chap. VI and, in particular, pp. 285 ff.

Immediately afterward, he set in motion the conclusion of the negotiations that had been underway for some time regarding Catholic Action. Two weeks later, on August 20, the secretary of the PNF, Starace, and the president of Catholic Action, Lamberto Vignoli, reached an agreement 368.

The precise terms of the agreement remain unknown to this day. What can be said is that it must have been a rather vague declaration of intent or, if one prefers, of good intentions based on the reaffirmation of the validity of the September 1931 agreements (which Starace, not coincidentally, had republished on August 23 in the "PNF Bulletin of Provisions" 369) and on the Holy See's promise to undertake, in the near future, a new reform of the statutes of Catholic Action, aimed, on the one hand, at depoliticizing it as much as possible and eliminating the last remaining former members of the Popular Party (as the regime desired) and, on the other hand, at making it even more (as the Pope insisted) an integral part of the hierarchical Church.

It is impossible to speak of a new, genuine agreement or an effective resolution of the crisis. It is no coincidence that Ciano, referring in his diary to the Starace-Vignoli meeting 37°, wrote that it put an end, "at least for now," to "the friction between the Party and Catholic Action." For Mussolini, it was a way to mask the impossibility for Fascism to fully carry out its plan to scale back Catholic Action, while also avoiding tying his own hands too tightly in anticipation of better times when the issue could be reopened—all while managing, for the time being, to give some satisfaction to the most intransigent Fascists. For the Pope, it was an undoubted victory, made all the greater by two facts: 1) that, after what had happened in recent years, merely reaffirming the agreements of September 1931 effectively meant that the Fascists were renouncing any attempt to renegotiate those aspects of the agreements that had proven unworkable for Fascism and tacitly accepting the Church's violation of them through the creation of the Central Office; 2) that—given the "Duce's" political flexibility—the Holy See could always hope to continue influencing him regarding other aspects of his policy, something that would

obviously have been impossible had the crisis escalated further. A victory, moreover, which—if we do not let ourselves be carried away by hindsight—it is very difficult to imagine the Holy See considered definitive: in the second half of 1938, nothing in fact gave any realistic grounds to believe either that Mussolini had definitively set aside the idea of reopening the entire issue at a more favorable moment for him or, even more so, that the end of the regime was approaching by leaps and bounds.

If we consider all this and bear in mind the hostility toward the Church that had been simmering for months among the rank-and-file of the Fascist Party (and, likely, the reluctance with which Starace must have concluded the agreement[371]), the fact that the reform of the statutes had yet to be implemented, and, finally, the existence of other sources of contention between the regime and the Church (especially regarding the issue of race) it becomes clear why the implementation of the agreement was so laborious and marked—especially in the more traditionally Catholic areas, where incidents of intolerance and violence had been most severe—by a series of new and sometimes heated controversies and incidents, to the point that the crisis was not resolved until several months after the death of Pius XI and Cardinal Pacelli's accession to the papacy.

As has rightly been noted 372, Pius XII's stance on the issue of Catholic Action showed a strong continuity with that of Pius XI. In particular, the new statutes—the broad outlines of which were previewed in *L'Osservatore Romano* on May 24 and August 2, 1939—were intended to reflect, to a large extent, the framework established by Pius XI. Nevertheless, the death of Pope Ratti and the election as pope of the more political and less impetuous Cardinal Pacelli helped to normalize the situation, especially since the new pope immediately sought to play it down: when he received G. Ciano in a courtesy audience on March 18, 1939, he was quick to tell him that he was "optimistic" about the religious situation in Italy and "that, if we are in agreement, he will remove Cardinal Pizzardo and entrust the leadership of Catholic Action to a committee of diocesan archbishops" 373. After that, the drafting of the new statutes proceeded swiftly and in accordance with the regime's wishes, so much so that on August 1, the embassy to the Holy See, reporting on their substance, while noting that a definitive judgment would have to await their actual implementation, nevertheless expressed an entirely positive overall assessment of them: "The reform of Catholic Action is undoubtedly significant and in line with the wishes of the Fascist Government" 374.

371 An echo of the reluctance with which Starace must have carried out Mussolini's order to put an end to the matter is evident in the "Order Sheet" of November 25, 1938 (Proceedings of the PNF, vol. VIII, tome II, pp. 126 ff.), where he sternly reiterated that 1) the badges, "being… a traditional outward form of political parties," could be worn only within the context of associations; 2) that these associations could not engage in athletic or sporting activities, but only in "recreational and educational activities with religious purposes"; and he concluded: "It is evident that the activities of Catholic organizations, within the limits of these clauses [of September 1931], are possible only insofar as their leaders have not belonged to parties opposed to the Regime."

Nor can it be ruled out that—even though he had to reiterate that, as established by the 1931 agreements, there was no incompatibility between membership in the PNF and in Catholic Action organizations—Starace was in fact attempting, at least initially, to persist in the line of incompatibility. Among the various cases that could be cited in this regard, we will limit ourselves to mentioning one taken from a letter written on August 30, 1938, by the diocesan ecclesiastical assistant of the GIAC in Ancona to the central secretariat in Rome. In that letter (see GIAC Archives, "Confidential"), two cases of intimidation against two members of the Fascio and the GIAC were reported, aimed at forcing them to resign from the Catholic youth organization; it was stated that, since the two young men had referred to the communiqué on the Starace-Vignoli agreements, the secretary of the local Fascio had replied

“that the newspapers could publish whatever they wanted, but that they had received secret circulars instructing them to act as they did.”

If one considers that the replacement of lay leaders with clergy—let alone the other changes to the previous structure introduced by the new statutes (some of which were purely nominal, such as, for example, no longer defining members as “card-holding members” but “registered” and to call the membership card a “membership certificate”) certainly did not alter the essence of Catholic Action, such an assessment might suggest that the ambassador to the Holy See fell into that category of diplomats who end up unconsciously adopting the political motivations of the countries to which they are accredited. In reality, the other assessments expressed at the time were also all more or less favorable; even the more thoughtful ones that broadened the discussion to the background of the new statutes, the conditions and strategy of the Church at that time—and, while not hiding their satisfaction that Catholic Action had lost its autonomy and mobility and showed a clear tendency toward “spiritual recollection in the ecclesiastical sense,” which ruled out “any possible action that might justify potential accusations

374 ASAE, Holy See, b. 44 (1939), phase 1, “Political Activity of the Clergy in Italy.” In previous reports, the ambassador had recounted his discussions with Monsignor Colli (Bishop of Parma and secretary of the Cardinal Commission for Catholic Action), with Cardinal Lavitrano, Archbishop of Palermo (a member of the same commission), and with L. Vignoli regarding the revision of the statutes. Of particular interest is what he wrote about his conversation with the Archbishop of Palermo: “The Cardinal confirmed what Monsignor Colli, Bishop of Parma, had told me regarding the drafting of the new Statute, which will centralize the effective leadership of Catholic Action in ecclesiastical hands. The laity will be placed under the direct authority of the bishops, from whom they will receive orders.

“The Cardinal told me that the Commission of which he is a member will gladly receive any comments or suggestions that may be submitted to it and will endeavor to resolve any issues that are brought to its attention.

“I told the Cardinal that we must avoid anything that might, even indirectly, have a political flavor.

“Catholic Action in the past had erred greatly in this regard. Then there was the question of personnel. All those who had held positions of any significance in the now-defunct Popular Party were to be removed as politically suspect individuals. Many of the leaders of the Central Office of Catholic Action had compromised themselves by adopting political stances on various occasions. I mentioned to the Cardinal Comm. Vignoli, Prof. Gedda, and Dr. Ambrosetti. The Cardinal replied that Ambrosetti had already been sidelined.

“I had the impression that, without too much haste, Catholic Action will be restored to its traditional religious function, stripping it of the political content it had acquired under the pontificate of Pius XI. However, we must not rush, partly because the Church evolves slowly.

“In this particular case, the slowness is, in a certain sense, justified by Pius XII’s due respect for his predecessor.

“It is well known that the late Pope had a particular fondness for Catholic Action, which he called the

apple of his eye. The reigning Pontiff, who was Pius XI's most faithful collaborator, is demonstrating a certain resolve in reforming Catholic Action. It seems to me that it is only right to give Pius XII this credit, and that we, for our own sake, should not make the Pope's task too difficult by demanding that the process be accelerated."

"of encroachment into the political sphere"—showed that they realized, however, that Catholic Action had "grown considerably stronger," its aims remained unchanged "not only in the spiritual realm, but also in the civil and social spheres," and that "spiritual recollection in the ecclesiastical sense" did not consist "in a mere retreat from active political positions to a different plane, but rather in a true concentration of forces, with a view to… a more energetic and effective activity"575. So much so that Rogari came to the conclusion that the regime, while welcoming the reform, would have misinterpreted it 376. This judgment is, in our view, unacceptable, both when applied to those who were unaware of the background to the crisis of '38 and, even more so, when applied to those who were aware of it.

Given the course of the crisis and considering the international situation at the time they were drafted (between late 1938 and early August 1939), the new statutes were, in fact, the best that Fascism could have hoped for. At the very moment when national and international political circumstances had forced Mussolini to temporarily abandon not only the extension of the Fascist "cultural revolution" to Catholics but also to scale back Catholic Action, it is in fact evident that normal, immediate political logic had once again become decisive. Within the framework of this logic, it was still possible to consider taking action to counter the expansionist drive of certain Catholic initiatives in civil society. And in fact, Bottai, in connection with the School Charter, sought to curb the expansion of private religious schools 377; the Ministry of Popular Culture took measures to put an end to the proliferation of parish movie theaters (nearly six hundred in 1939) and to force them to screen only films of a religious or educational nature[378], and the Ministry of the Interior expanded and tightened its controls over the smaller press—distributed at the diocesan and parish levels—so as to prevent any "overreach" beyond the religious and devotional sphere. But what really mattered was to win over as many Catholics as possible to the regime and—if that was not possible—to prevent their discontent (which, despite

375 See D. Cantimori, "The New Statutes of the ACI," in *Civiltà fascista*, September 1940, pp. 705 ff. In a subsequent article, "Further Reflections on Catholic Action" (ibid., October 1940, pp. 800 ff.), Cantimori, commenting on some recent Catholic writings regarding the recently implemented reform of Catholic Action, noted a certain tendency to attribute to it "almost the significance of a new non expedit": "a sort of estrangement of the Catholic, as such, from political and economic activity, or from political and governmental activity."

(After all, for the vast majority, it is not possible to speak of anti-fascism) might transform into opposition and a rallying point for others. And for this second purpose, the best tool was the "new" Catholic Action, both because it was now under the effective control of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the Holy See, and because—the only point in its favor noted by the regime following the crisis of '31—the former Popular Party presence within it was now virtually nonexistent and no longer able to exert its own influence. In short, at that point and for the time being, the "freezer" function that Catholic Action had served—at least in part—for the Church up to that point also suited the regime.

In the next chapter, we will examine the attitude of Italians toward the regime, fascism, and the "Duce" during these years, as well as the results achieved by Mussolini's "totalitarian turn." What we have said regarding the family and religion as "external" forces with which the fascist "cultural revolution"—both the form and substance of fascist "totalitarianism" —had to contend with already offers some

insights into both its fundamental failure and the utter inconsistency of Mussolini's claim to simultaneously achieve two mutually contradictory goals—we deliberately set aside the question of whether they were individually achievable—namely, the totalitarianization of the Italian regime and society and a policy of "great presence" on the international stage.

Chapter Two

"Consensus" Between Mid-1936 and Mid-1940

At the beginning of the previous chapter, we outlined a brief overview of the country's attitude toward the Fascist regime in the second half of the 1930s. Although in some cases—particularly with regard to militant Catholics—our discussion was somewhat more in-depth, we deliberately avoided going into detail, limiting ourselves to mentioning only what we deemed necessary to outline the general framework for the discussion of the regime, its problems, and its prospects for the future, which we wished to develop. In the following chapters, as we examine the various phases of Fascist foreign policy between mid-1936 and mid-1940, we will see the repercussions these had on the attitude of the country as a whole and its various segments toward the regime and Mussolini. What we have said and what we will say, however, cannot fully exhaust the issue. To truly understand the reality of Italy between the end of the war in Ethiopia and Italy's entry into World War II, it is necessary to delve more deeply into the country's attitude. It is necessary to fully grasp the underlying context against which both the regime's policy of totalitarianization—which we have already discussed—and the Fascist foreign policy—which we will discuss later—operated, and thus to understand, on the one hand, to what extent the evolution of domestic and foreign policy influenced the country's attitude and, on the other hand, how the country reacted to it; or, to put it another way, what aspects of that evolution can be considered a foreshadowing of what occurred in the country's attitude during the years of Italy's participation in World War II, and what, on the other hand, must be considered specific to the reality of the Fascist regime during this period of its history—and thus viewed not through the lens of what actually came to pass, but through the lens of how the regime envisioned its future. If this is not understood, one falls into the error—as G. Amendola[1]—anti-fascist historiography has fallen into for years: that is, the error of exaggerating the evidence of overt opposition to the war in 1940 and—we might add—of widespread and conscious opposition to fascism, which in reality were far less widespread, overt, and conscious than is commonly claimed and, moreover, lacked the strength to manifest themselves and organize. Or, worse still, in the view—against which E. Curiel explicitly argued and which he called "absurd" as early as 1938[2],—that "only continuous and ruthless repression" managed "to keep the fascist regime in power against the unanimous will of the Italian people."

G. Amendola, *History of the Italian Communist Party 1921–1943*, Rome 1978, pp. 426 ff.

In June 1940—we refer to this date because, for the purposes of our discussion, it is undoubtedly the most significant—what characterized the Italian situation in this regard was:

1) the still considerable—despite everything—presence of support for the regime, which was by then largely passive (though this does not mean it was solely the result of coercion), but in sectors of the country that were by no means negligible, it was also active;

2) the extreme weakness—in terms of numbers, organization, and, most importantly, politics (the inability to take unifying action on behalf of the country)—of active anti-fascism of any stripe;

3) the complete fragmentation and powerlessness of all social and political forces within the regime, each concerned only with its own particular problems and interests and, therefore, objectively and subjectively incapable of any initiative themselves.

Characteristic of the situation in June 1940, these three realities must always be kept in mind to understand the entire period we are examining, and one must not be misled —by overestimating their importance and attributing to them the significance of a trend—by specific events, such as the anti-fascist resurgence during the early stages of the Spanish Civil War[3], or by forms of discontent and concern for the future—even if quite widespread—such as those caused by the growing danger of an inter-European conflict[4] and by the repercussions of the increasingly difficult economic situation on the living conditions of the masses. These events, however important and capable of arousing the attention —and at times the concern—of the police apparatus, the PNF, and even some of the regime's top leaders,[5] were in fact either fleeting and manageable through routine repressive measures, or never took on characteristics that would allow one to speak of a basic, spontaneous anti-fascism among the masses or even merely a sort of preparatory stage leading to it. To take on such characteristics, the discontent and concerns—however intense they might have been—lacked an essential element: a concrete alternative to fascism and, except for small groups—even among the working masses, where the issue was far more simplified, boiling down in practice to the fascism-communism dichotomy—a model of government in which people could truly place their trust due to its

5 On October 23, 1938, a PNF informant operating in Turin sent the following confidential report to Rome: "A barely concealed discontent is spreading among Turin's working class, stemming both from the economic crisis—which has led to reduced working hours in the largest factories—and from wages that do not allow for the minimum standard of living necessary.

" This discontent manifests itself in various forms, but the most common is gossiping about the Regime and the autarkic measures being implemented. And one hears talk of this among workers as soon as they find themselves among old comrades they can trust, and among women—both in the city markets and, these days, outside schools while waiting for their children. The discontent that is spreading is very serious and seems to be growing day by day. The measure granting the 53rd "week" was not enough; what is needed are supplies or major public works projects capable of absorbing a large workforce.

" There is also discontent among the young women and women who, until now, have been employed in large numbers in the city's commercial and industrial offices; the measure limiting women's employment affects them personally, and many who do not know how else to earn a living are worried about their future. All these circumstances and situations have created a latent hostility toward the regime—a hostility that is not publicly expressed out of fear but that can be felt and sensed by everyone."

After reading the report, Starace—as was his custom in such cases—forwarded it to the Turin regional leader, Piero Cazzotti, asking him to explain it and emphasizing in particular the statement in the final paragraph. The reply he received a few days later from Cazzotti was certainly overly optimistic; nevertheless, based on the information available to us today, it must be said that the substantive political assessment of the mood of Turin's workers made by the regional leader was, on the whole, more realistic than that provided by the informant: "I have received confidential report no. 40605/B dated October 2–3.

“ I was in fact about to write to you myself regarding the situation of Turin’s workers—a matter to which Comrade Venturi, Secretary of the Provincial Fascist Union of Industrial Workers, had also drawn my attention—a situation that has indeed worsened in recent times, not so much due to layoffs as to the sharp reductions in working hours implemented by Fiat Lingotto.

“During the last half of October, the hiring of workers ceased almost entirely, with the exception of a few skilled workers, and as a result, a sense of unease has grown among the workers, as many have now been unemployed for several months.

“Even the temporary arrangements that, until recently, helped the unemployed by providing them with work for a few days a month have now disappeared.

“The worsening situation is particularly acute in the metal, textile, apparel, and transportation sectors, and less so in the chemical, furniture, and construction sectors.

“This Federation is monitoring the situation with the utmost attention; what is certain is that the expected tax cuts on gasoline and automobiles would immediately lead to a significant improvement, as they would provide a strong new boost to the automotive industry and create new job opportunities for all small and medium-sized businesses operating in related sectors.

“I cannot, however, help but note the unjustified and stubborn insistence with which the informant continues to speak of latent hostility toward the Regime. This is false: the working class is certainly not in the best of spirits due to the sacrifices it endures—which have recently become more severe—but it is intelligent enough and well-informed about the situation in various countries not to blame the Regime for the current state of affairs, nor does it fail at every opportunity to demonstrate its true feelings of absolute devotion and unlimited trust in the Duce.” (ACS, PNF, Political Situation in the Provinces, section “Turin”).

efficiency and its ability to avert greater evils—or evils no different from those afflicting other countries—or thanks to which Fascism had established itself.

The annual reports by the General Directorate of the PS and by Bocchini on anti-fascist activity, public order, and popular sentiment,[6] though increasingly bureaucratic in tone and, here and there, excessively optimistic,[7] are significant in this regard. Like those of previous years[8], they continue to treat “public order” and “public sentiment” as distinct from “anti-fascist activity,” viewing them as two separate issues with no real connection between them. Anti-fascism is given significant attention only in the report for 1936:

While the Ethiopian campaign had no effect in favor of the anti-fascist political parties—but rather strengthened and heightened the patriotic spirit of the Italian people and even led quite a few anti-fascists to reexamine their consciences— the victories of the “popular fronts” in the French and Spanish general elections first, and the Spanish Civil War later, had an undeniable impact on that segment of the Italian population that had not wholeheartedly embraced the Regime.

Not only did this not escape the attention of the police, but it had been anticipated from the very first signs of the rise of extremist parties abroad, so that it was possible to immediately put in place the best measures to prevent the hopes that had so quickly blossomed anew in the hearts of the few individuals who remained die-hard opponents of the regime from having any influence whatsoever on broad segments of the population. Through swift and simultaneous action by the OVRA and the provincial

police headquarters, some of the most daring anti-fascist elements—who had long been under police surveillance—were arrested, especially in the provinces of Turin, Milan, Venice, Padua, Rovigo, Trieste, Modena, Bologna, and Livorno, and subsequently in other provinces such as Florence, Savona, Parma, Ancona, Terni, and Bari. Those arrested who bore the greatest responsibility were brought before the Special Court, while the others were subject to police measures.

This prompt police action has disrupted the initial and most daring plans of the subversives, who now appear to have realized the futility of their efforts to achieve their goals quickly and have reverted to a more cautious tactic

7 Among the various cases that could be cited, the most typical involves observations regarding unemployment trends. Riding the wave of widespread hope sparked by the conquest of Ethiopia, the 1936 report addressed the subject as follows: “The phenomenon of unemployment, which in the past—especially during the winter months—gave cause for some concern, has greatly diminished, and there is confidence that it will be definitively eliminated in the very near future through the placement of surplus labor—which cannot be accommodated in Italy—in the vast and profitable territories of the Empire.”

In the two subsequent reports, the optimism was more moderate. The 1937 report states: “Unemployment has also decreased significantly, both due to the placement of contingents of workers in the territories of the Empire and due to a greater boost given to industries and factories.”

And in the report for 1938: “Unemployment, which has remained stable in some sectors, is decreasing significantly in others thanks to the boost provided by the Regime to factories and industries and to the gradual dispatch of settlers and workers to Libya and throughout the Empire.”

In the subsequent report, for 1939, the reference to unemployment has disappeared entirely: “Unemployment, which has remained stable in some areas and is decreasing significantly in others, has been alleviated by the Regime’s various social welfare programs.”

a measure that, although it must be carefully monitored, requires a very slow process and cannot be highly effective.

Given the continuous and significant movement of Italian nationals from Italy to other countries—especially to France—and vice versa, and considering that the directives for any movement against the Regime are issued by anti-fascist centers based abroad, the police have made it a priority to monitor, as far as possible, the activities of these centers and the general behavior of emigrants. It has thus been able to ascertain that a significant number of exiles, grouped around the Communist Party, the “Justice and Freedom” movement, and the anarchist movement, have enlisted in the Spanish Red Militias and are conducting intense propaganda to induce others to enlist. There have been signs of attempts to extend this propaganda within the Kingdom as well, especially among skilled workers, appealing to their sentiments not only with party rhetoric but also with enticing promises of rewards. In response to such attempts, the police have carried out diligent surveillance in the circles deemed most susceptible to such influence and have made several arrests; these arrests, however, have demonstrated that the attempts observed so far are of very limited scope. It has also been ascertained that the “Red Aid” organization periodically sends subsidies of varying amounts to families residing in the Kingdom whose members—subversives who have enlisted in the Spanish Red Militias—are supported by it, resorting to the most subtle ruses to conceal the true source of these funds and to make them appear to have been sent by private individuals for personal reasons. Had this activity by “Red Aid” not been

immediately suppressed, it would evidently have been the most effective means of propaganda; therefore, the police, through timely and precise instructions issued to all Prefectures, prevented these subsidies from reaching their recipients.

As a consequence of the events in Spain, a new form of anti-fascist propaganda emerged over the past year, directed at Italians in the Kingdom, as the Barcelona radio station began broadcasting news, speeches, and lectures in Italian—the content of which naturally aligned with the revolutionary programs of the parties that had taken control of that city. These broadcasts, which can be picked up in the Kingdom by ordinary radio receivers, could not fail to attract the attention of the police; and while measures have already been implemented to jam them in various locations throughout the Kingdom, appropriate instructions have been issued for the rapid installation of additional equipment capable of rendering them completely unintelligible to Italian listeners.

Over the past year, the Communist Party has continued to evolve its propaganda methods toward increasingly insidious and dangerous forms. It has not only intensified the so-called “legal method”—aimed at infiltrating and taking control of the Regime’s trade union bodies—but has also launched a campaign of subtle persuasion, based on the most brazen yet seductive lies, targeting those segments of the population that it had previously considered, due to their social standing and ideas, to be in complete opposition to the party, such as small landowners, Catholics, and even members of the PNF. The Communist Party has pinned its greatest hopes on this new method and is seeking to implement it by every means at its disposal, given that it has, as is well known, been successful abroad and formed the basis for the creation of “popular fronts.” The police have, of course, adapted their surveillance and investigative methods to the new Communist tactics in order to neutralize them effectively and have not failed to alert the responsible bodies within the labor unions. Communist propaganda, therefore, as an organizational activity, has not fared any better in the past year than in previous years.

Instead, there has been a greater number of individual acts of subversion, manifested through shouting, private speeches, graffiti, etc., undoubtedly due to the repercussions of the Spanish Civil War and other events abroad that have benefited extremist parties. Those responsible have been systematically arrested and subjected to police measures.

The “Justice and Freedom” movement, which has continued to distinguish itself from the Communist Party in its propaganda efforts—despite having at one point entered into a pact for joint action—carried out its activities over the past year through its usual distribution of leaflets and the pamphlet “Justice and Freedom” in very small formats and through the publicity tactic—repeated twice and already used in previous years—of launching rubber balloons containing leaflets from locations near the border, so that, with the help of the wind, they would fall within national territory. This movement, which is aimed especially at the intellectual classes, has found less support than in previous years among opponents of the regime residing in the Kingdom, and the few people who sought to take action in its favor were promptly identified and arrested.

The anarchist movement, which is less well-resourced, experienced a certain resurgence in the past year as a result of the Spanish Civil War, in which anarchists played a significant role; it is being closely monitored by the police due to the greater individual danger posed by its members.

The other minor subversive parties, which—due to their limited organization—cannot carry out effective action beyond the borders of the host state, had no significant influence on the events of the past year; and when they sought to take an active part in anti-fascist action, they had to align themselves with “Justice and Freedom.”

In the reports for subsequent years, not only is the space devoted to anti-fascist activity much smaller, but they also clearly reveal how—once the initial phase of the Spanish Civil War and its major repercussions on a certain number of more or less "dormant" anti-fascists had passed—the fight against fascism, while continuing to require constant surveillance, prevention, and repression, as well as a continuous effort to adapt to the ever-changing methods used by anti-fascist parties to make their voices heard in Italy and to maintain contact with the militant groups active there—once again, by 1937–38, it had become a less pressing concern for the regime than others and—most importantly—was actually on the decline.[9] Nor does what we know today about the situation and activities of the anti-fascist movement in

9 Report for 1937: "Even during the past year of 1937, the few attempts at subversive propaganda, especially by the Communist Party, met with no greater success than in previous years.

"Indeed, it was noted that the anti-fascist parties abroad, while not abandoning their attempts to carry out their harmful activities within the Kingdom, were forced to limit their intensity and settle for results even more meager than before.

"This is due to the fact that the leaders of the subversive movement have now been forced to acknowledge that the police's preventive and repressive measures are now so well-organized and effective that they have had to abandon all forms of propaganda that involve a certain risk.

"Thus, for example, while there is a continued emphasis on the shipment of anti-fascist printed material from abroad, this in recent years has substantially contrasted with this overall picture. It makes it a bit more dynamic here and there, but not very different and, above all, from the regime's perspective, less realistic.[10]

The issue of "public order" and "public sentiment" is more complex. If one adopts Bocchini's logic and, therefore, views the problem through the lens of whether or not public order is disrupted and the public attitude of the masses toward the regime, the picture outlined in the police's annual reports is, in this regard, consistently consistent—a decrease has been noted in the clandestine smuggling of printed materials across borders.

" " "All things considered, the greatest obstacle to attempts at harmful propaganda is provided by the high spirit of patriotism that animates the Italian people and by their deep devotion to the Regime.

" On the few occasions when the first signs of a resurgence were observed among those well-known and identified elements still steeped in the old ideologies, the police always intervened promptly, arresting those responsible; in the most serious cases, they were referred to the Special Court for the Defense of the State, while in other cases, appropriate administrative measures were taken."

Report for 1938: "Even during the past year of 1938, there was no shortage—albeit to a somewhat reduced extent—of the usual attempts by the foreign branches of subversive parties to spread propaganda within the Kingdom, especially in circles most susceptible to the influence of their erroneous theories.

" Above all, this activity was characterized by a constant search for new methods to evade the vigilant attention of the police, but every attempt invariably came to nothing.

“Thus, attempts were made to entrust various party assignments to compatriots returning from abroad who had never engaged in any significant political activity; likewise, the method of sending letters written in a secret code was gradually replaced by cutting letters into several pieces and sending each one separately to a different address.

“ ” The results, however, were extremely meager, due to the decisive and tireless action of the police forces, which—drawing on the keen intuition gained through experience—are able to detect even the slightest hint of subversive activity and intervene promptly wherever necessary, arresting those responsible and bringing them before the Special Court for the Defense of the State or taking appropriate police measures against them.

“Moreover, with the sudden and definitive defeat of the Spanish Reds, one of the events that could have been exploited as a pretext to spread unrest and discontent has been eliminated, and the population has, in fact, received further proof of the Duce’s far-sighted political wisdom.

“Nor have the measures in favor of the defense of the race had any significant repercussions; their gradual implementation has met with the approval of the masses.”

1939 Report: “In the past year, 1939, the police forces remained vigilant and active in preventing and suppressing any attempt at subversive propaganda, enabling them to quickly identify and crack down on any hint of anti-fascist activity, which, moreover, is steadily declining, by bringing those responsible before the Special Court for the Defense of the State and, in less serious cases, imposing appropriate administrative measures.”

1 0 Of all the initiatives undertaken by the anti-fascist movement in recent years, the one that likely caused the regime the greatest concern was the plan—whether real or alleged—for anti-fascist elements to land in Sardinia. As soon as he received news of it, on March 27, 1938, Bocchini informed the ministers of War and the Navy, the general commands of the Armed Forces and the Guardia di Finanza, and the prefects of Sardinia with the following telegram: “It is reported by a reliable source that exiles are organizing a landing at an unspecified location in Sardinia, a landing that is expected to provoke unrest and an uprising among the population, particularly among supporters of former Deputy Lussu. Preparations are reportedly being made in Barcelona, from where groups destined for the landing would depart.

“ The Ministry of War and the Navy, as well as the General Commands of the Royal Carabinieri and the Guardia di Finanza, are requested to take all necessary and most effective measures—through prompt and urgent arrangements to be made with the Prefects of Cagliari, Nuoro, and Sassari—to prevent the aforementioned plan from being carried out. The General Command of the Royal Carabinieri is also requested to take into account the possibility of reinforcements being withdrawn from the island in connection with the extraordinary services arranged for upcoming ceremonies.”

At the same time, Admiral Guido Bacci di Capaci was tasked with preparing the defense plan. The Caprera and Sabauda divisions were placed on alert, and various forms of maritime and aerial surveillance were established, ACS, Ministry of the Navy, Cabinet (1934–50), b. 67, phase “Public Order.”

The report is essentially accurate and can be summarized in four points: 1) the country was essentially completely peaceful; 2) there were a few incidents and some labor unrest—though of little significance—due primarily to local and/or economic causes, which never took on a political character or

constituted opposition to the regime; 3) the vast majority of incidents and labor unrest of an economic nature took place in the second half of 1936 and early 1937; following the wage increases of July ’36 and, above all, April ’37, their number decreased significantly[11]; 4) throughout the entire period under consideration, there was no reason to believe that public sentiment toward the regime had changed. However, if one adopts a less restrictive approach—one less conditioned by the criterion of disturbances to public order—in short, one that is less “police-oriented” and more historical—the picture immediately becomes more complex. To characterize the Italian reality of these years, in fact, it is no longer sufficient to refer solely to the country’s substantial and absolute tranquility; one must also —and above all—take into account the particular nature of this “tranquility,” what it consisted of, where it came from, and the repercussions this had on Italians’ attitudes toward the regime. Only in this way is it possible to understand why, despite the existence of strong tensions, “public order” remained entirely normal; why discontent with the regime’s policies did not become politicized or turn into opposition; and why anti-fascism made some

11 The 1936 Report states: “The internal situation of the country was entirely normal, and public order remained absolutely peaceful during the past year.

“A few incidents of very limited significance, which occurred in some municipalities of the Kingdom, were distinctly local in nature, not driven by political motives but by economic reasons, the imposition of municipal taxes, or personal disputes. The intervention of the authorities resolved these issues, and in cases where liability was established, the accused were held accountable in accordance with the law.

“A few disputes between workers and employers were promptly resolved through the timely intervention of political and labor union authorities, while the numerous measures adopted in favor of the most disadvantaged classes, and the increase in wages and salaries for workers and employees have provided these categories of workers with clear proof that the Fascist Regime, in accordance with the motto of His Excellency the Head of Government, is moving ever closer to the people.”

In subsequent reports, the language becomes even more concise, and references to incidents or unrest caused by economic difficulties gradually become rarer:

1937: “Public order remained entirely normal throughout the year 1937.

“A few incidents, which occurred in some municipalities of the Kingdom, were caused by local disputes or economic reasons, and none by political motives.

“The agreement between employers and workers has had a beneficial effect on the workforce, which has been working at a feverish pace everywhere.”

1938: “During the year 1938, public order remained normal throughout the Kingdom.

“Rare demonstrations in some municipalities were caused by local disputes, never by political motives. Work proceeded everywhere at an orderly and feverish pace, and the consistently effective and timely intervention of the competent authorities promptly resolved the sporadic disputes between employers and workers.”

1939: “Throughout 1939, public order remained normal except for various incidents of a local nature, none of which were politically motivated.”

1940: “During the same year, public order remained normal except for various local incidents, none of which were caused by political motives.”

“Unemployment declined significantly due to the boost given to the war industries and the call-ups for military service.”

breaches, significant for their social context (among young intellectuals) and for certain novel aspects, but, in terms of the regime’s stability, insignificant; and—nevertheless—many things beneath the country’s apparent “tranquility” were changing at all levels, even within Fascism itself; so much so that, while there has been talk, in relation to these years, of the emergence of a “new anti-fascism,” one can just as reasonably speak of the emergence during this same period of a “new fascism.”

Once the initial wave of enthusiasm and hope sparked by the victory in Ethiopia had subsided, the second half of the 1930s was marked by growing discontent and concerns regarding the regime’s policies, alongside a parallel, gradual erosion of popular support. On this point, virtually all scholars who have studied this period are in agreement today;
differences of opinion arise later, when it comes to assessing the nature, extent, and above all the consequences of this phenomenon. Similarly, nearly everyone agrees in attributing this crisis of consensus to the hostilities and fears aroused by Fascist domestic and, above all, foreign policy; to the regime’s gradual shift toward totalitarianism and its encroachment on private life; and, even more so, to Italy’s progressive rapprochement with Germany—a rapprochement that the vast majority of Italians considered unnatural and, above all, as time went on, a harbinger of war and, to a large extent, the root cause of the regime’s totalitarian regression. Less emphasis, however, is placed on the difficulties faced by the masses in their daily lives and at work. Yet, while there is no doubt that these difficulties were a secondary cause of the erosion of popular support, their study is of great importance for understanding: a) how the “crisis of consensus” that occurred during these years was not determined solely by political factors but, at least in part, was also triggered by economic and politico-economic reasons;[12] b) how it had to

12 In a highly confidential report to Bocchini on the political-economic situation in the province of Ferrara, dated March 1, 1939, and drafted at the explicit request of the General Directorate of Public Security by the regional inspector for the provinces of Modena, Reggio Emilia, Parma, Rovigo, Ferrara, and Piacenza, following a summary of the political situation—described overall as “one that cannot give rise to any concern”—the following is stated regarding the economic situation: “The picture presented by the economic situation, however, is not equally reassuring; it is extremely delicate and warrants constant, methodical, and extremely diligent scrutiny. The economic situation cannot be considered in isolation but must be examined in close connection with the political situation, with which it forms a single complex and over which it currently predominates.

“Today, the economy has become politics, with the predictable consequence that a given event—which must be ruled out based on an assessment of the political situation—must instead be considered possible based on an assessment of the economic situation. If the economic situation were to worsen rather than improve, it could lead to collapse or crisis even among those who are sincerely and fervently loyal to the Regime. In short: the masses will face any event—even a deplorable one—with serenity, unity, and confidence, but they may not bear a worsening of general economic hardship with serenity and calm. The regime may ask for—and will receive—everything from the people, but it is to be hoped that it will not be forced to demand further economic sacrifices. “It is difficult to fight against certain basic needs and against poverty” (ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Personnel Division, file 1963, b. 183).

Depending on social class and age, there were different consequences, which, on the one hand, led to the emergence of new forms of consensus—overall in the minority, but no less significant for understanding the Italian reality of the time and, in particular, their repercussions on fascism—and, on the other hand, contributed significantly to fragmenting Italian society into many closed communities concerned only with their own particular problems and interests, with the consequence — as we have already noted — of creating a situation of complete disarray and powerlessness among all social and political forces within the regime and, therefore, of ultimately making the erosion of a whole series of forms of support—from active to passive—less severe for the regime.

If one reviews the reports—especially those from the second half of 1936, 1937, and 1938, but ultimately also those from 1939 and the first half of 1940 —from prefects, police informants, the Party, the OVRA, and the SIM—it becomes clear how, during these years, economic hardships united, to a greater or lesser extent, peasants, workers, and the lower and middle classes, sapping their energy and shaping their attitudes toward the regime. Particularly significant in this regard, due to their greater objectivity, are the weekly reports that the SIM compiled in 1936–38 based on the censorship of direct correspondence to and from Africa and Spain (and vice versa)13. A few excerpts may be useful in providing an immediate sense of the phenomenon:

March 18, 1937:

Expressions reflecting economic hardship remained at their usual level throughout the week: somewhat pronounced in Lucca, Sondrio, and the province of Treviso.

In all regions, complaints about the property tax are increasing in number and sometimes take on a bitter tone. Many write that they are unable to pay and turn to relatives in the AOI to send the necessary funds. Others, lacking liquid assets, claim they must take on onerous debts with individuals eager for illicit gains or submit to harsh terms with financial institutions. A sense of fear and resentment lingers in the hearts of those who own a small house or a few modest plots of land, simply because they are considered property owners: since they cannot cover the loan with their own resources, they fear tax action or expropriation by the state.

In Sardinia, there is fear that the government intends to levy a 20% tax on postal savings. This rumor has been confirmed in various letters from that region. In the liberated provinces, political issues are overshadowed by economic concerns. Complaints are emerging from modest rural residents and small property owners regarding their inability to meet any obligations arising from bank advances for the 5% real estate loan.

From the Kingdom, correspondence remains satisfactory despite the fact that the economic situation shows no signs of improving. Economic hardship is felt in almost all regions, but particularly in southern Italy and the islands.

Almost all correspondence continues to highlight the very significant hardship faced by the middle and lower classes as a result of unemployment, the tax burden, rising prices, and the lack of credit and commercial activity.

The regions where the hardship linked to unemployment appears most pronounced are: Veneto, Lucania, Puglia, Calabria, Sicily, and Sardinia.

Reports from Naples indicate the imminent reopening of the Pattison shipyards, where thousands of local workers hope to find employment.

Reports from S. Severino Rota and Pandolo (Salerno) indicate that tuberculosis is rampant and claiming victims; this is primarily due to the inadequate diet forced upon people by the dire economic conditions.

In the provinces of Apulia, a mood of discouragement has set in regarding colonization in the Italian East Indies (AOI): many believe that Italian workers in the AOI will be largely replaced by indigenous workers of both sexes. This belief is dashing the hopes of many Apulian workers and farmers of being able to settle permanently in the AOI.

In Gioia del Colle, the population deplores the subversive demonstrations that took place there; there is talk of many arrests of “red cowards.”

In almost all regions, the increase in wages and salaries—especially for white-collar workers—appears to have been met with considerable indifference. The vast majority of correspondents note a clear disparity between the meager raise and the excessive cost of living. In other words, the increase in wages and salaries would have caused, on the one hand, a noticeable rise in prices and, on the other, would have focused citizens’ attention on their difficult living conditions. The rise in prices, according to the correspondents, would have a particular impact on food and clothing—that is, on items of absolute necessity.

July 3, 1937:

From the liberated provinces:

South Tyrol. Fifty percent of the correspondence contains reports reflecting unemployment, high taxes, and a lack of money in circulation.

Gorizia. From Cernizza and Idria di Montenero, on the Italian-Yugoslav border, some Slovenians allude, more or less veiledly, to a certain resurgence of irredentist sentiments.

In Gorizia, female workers at the Brunner cotton mill complain of being exploited to the point of exhaustion: each worker is now reportedly assigned two machines, instead of just one as in the past. Many workers are said to have fallen ill due to this excessive workload.

From the Kingdom:

The predominant theme in the correspondence reflects announcements of repatriation, which are causing families concern over the economic consequences.

While cities continue to report difficulties in finding work and high food prices, rural areas unanimously express satisfaction with the excellent wheat and fruit harvests.

The following other noteworthy news items were reported this week. - In Lombardy, there is widespread discontent over the continuous rise in the prices of basic necessities, especially bread.

- In Fontana Serra (Marche), there is concern over the state of the leather market. Leather prices,

already high, are rising further. Business has come to a standstill, and no recovery is expected until September. Retailers are hoping for a price drop and claim that the requirement to pay in cash for these goods is significantly hindering business.

- Complaints from Bari that post offices are refusing to accept parcels bound for Ethiopia—weighing 2 kg and containing personal effects.

- From Castelluccio Inferiore (Lucania), there are strong and well-founded hopes due to the presence of a major lignite deposit. Job opportunities are expected to arise in mining operations and for the construction of a plant to extract gasoline through the hydrogenation process.

- From Naples, workers at soap factories report that they have been laid off due to a lack of raw materials needed for production (fats, caustic soda, coconut oil). They allude to favoritism allegedly taking place without the Ministry's knowledge; that is, they claim that some companies are supplied with ample raw materials, while other, less favored companies are left without them.

Hoarding of all kinds of foodstuffs (especially flour, oil, and lard) is taking place in Naples by many private individuals, depending on their financial means, because further increases in the cost of these goods are expected.

- In Sardinia and Sicily, some improvement in the economic situation is noted, due to a favorable harvest season (citrus fruits, wheat, tomatoes, etc.).

November 1937:

Reports continue to come in frequently regarding conscription, with mention of the usual alleged purposes: in Libya, Spain, and even China.

The general economic situation remains stable. The usual complaints about economic hardship and unemployment are frequently reported, with some mention of the tax burden.

Some corporations are expressing concern over the newly enacted capital tax and, unable to pass this tax on to consumers due to already high product prices, are considering offsetting the cost by reducing their workforce.

There are persistent reports of unemployment from Turin and Ferrara, but the tone is more urgent in the southern regions (especially Calabria), where workers and artisans are imploring their relatives in the AOI to find them some work, since it is impossible to find any in Italy.

As for the agricultural situation, a good olive harvest is generally expected.

The launch of the Apulian Agency for Colonization in the AOI is reported with a sense of relief. It is noted that there are many applications from farmers and veterans of Africa; that settlers will receive a daily wage of about 20–25 lire for the first few years, after which they will become owners of the reclaimed land and will be able to bring their families to live with them.

August 20, 1938:

Regarding the international situation, the main points highlighted in the correspondence are:

- the continuing instability in Europe, which fuels fears of a possible war;

- the protracted war in Spain, which weighs on our economic balance and prevents us from moving forward quickly with the development of our Empire;

- the cautious stance of England and the hostile one of France, which strongly suggest that these two nations have set out to weaken us economically as much as possible.

Regarding the domestic economic situation, there is a growing sense of anxiety among the middle class in the search for employment, which is attributed to the increased pressure caused by the rising cost of living. “Earn little or nothing and spend a lot” is the phrase that sums up the conditions faced by many families.

The high cost of basic necessities—especially bread and pasta—is highlighted, and some household budgets are presented to show residents in AO that their remittances no longer allow them to set aside savings.

A few comments in favor of the racist policy announced by the government have been noted.

In its immediacy, what emerges from these reports and other similar sources available today substantially substantiates and clarifies the picture of the economic situation in the second half of the 1930s.

After the war in Ethiopia, the economic recovery that had already begun in 1934 not only continued but, on the whole, intensified, taking on the character of moderate growth. Among the most important factors contributing to this recovery, five deserve special mention. First: the increase (especially in 1937) in imports following the end of sanctions and, in the second half of 1938, partly driven by the fall in international prices. Second: the increase in trade and activities related to the Empire. Third: the 40.9 percent reduction in the intrinsic value of the lira relative to the parity set in 1927, to which Mussolini—under concerted pressure from the entire economic world—had been forced to yield on October 5, 1936, in order to enable a revival of exports, which was necessary to breathe new life into and give momentum to the Italian economy, to allow for the import of raw materials essential for replenishing stocks depleted during the war, to implement “the regulatory plan for the Italian economy” announced by the “Duce” on March 23, 1936, and, in particular, to lay the groundwork for the autarkic policy.[14] Fourth: the monetary policy implemented by the government to bring about a change in the volume and distribution of annual monetary income15. Fifth: the ever-increasing state intervention in economic activity, which, primarily through public finance, exerted a strong impetus toward expansion, albeit at the cost of a doubling of the actual deficit[16] and an increase in the tax burden, particularly on wealth (tax revenues rose from sixteen and a half billion in 1935 to twenty-four billion in 1939[7]). In general quantitative terms, the actual extent of the recovery can be inferred from the growth of national income, investment, and gross private product:

	1936	1937	1938	1939	1940
National Income at Current Prices (millions of lire)	107,367	127,839	137,877	152,641	176,033
at 1938 Prices (millions of lire)	128,280	137,995	137,877	146,115	138,041
1938 per capita prices (lire)	3,022	3,228	3,201	3,360	3,140

Gross investment (millions of lire) 21,738 30,285 28,741 34,933 32,148
Gross Private Product (millions of lire) agriculture 28,538 37,681 40,138 43,816 51,698
industry 34,745 42,525 45,745 50,523 60,108
service sector 40,483 44,112 47,881 53,257 61,422
Such general data are obviously insufficient to truly outline the reality of the economic situation, much less to allow for a discussion of the actual living conditions of the masses. In fact, between 1936 and 1940, economic recovery and development were neither continuous nor uniform. Their trajectory varied depending on the sector and the repercussions these sectors faced—on the one hand, from Mussolini's foreign policy (expenditures for the Empire,[8] for intervention in Spain, for the occupation of Albania, for rearmament, etc.) and, on the other hand, the autarkic policy, which —precisely because it aimed to make the Italian economy as self-sufficient as possible—entailed a whole series of specific choices, a radical transformation of the economic system, and the prior development of the sectors necessary to make such an ambitious choice possible—one that was so at odds with the nature of the Italian economy—and thus, at least initially, extremely high economic and social costs.

A typical example is agriculture. After the war in Ethiopia, the sector never regained its former momentum, even though the production index

16 According to the calculations by F. A. Repaci, *Italian Public Finance in the 19th Century: 1861–1960*, Bologna 1962, p. 323, the actual deficit—which in 1935 had been just over 6 billion—rose to 14.7 in 1936, 18.9 in 1937, 13.4 in 1938, 14.4 in 1939, and 29.4 in 1940. In practice, the amount of actual expenditures, which in the four-year period 1929–34 had been equal to about 20 percent of gross national income, rose to nearly 30 percent.

Gross marketable output rose from 88.8 in 1936 to 98.2 in 1940, peaking at 104.06 in 1939. In practice, there was primarily an increase in grain production and in industrial and olive crops; however, this was accompanied by a further deterioration in high-value export crops and livestock farming. Nor did any of the most serious problems afflicting agriculture—especially in the south and in mountainous areas—show signs of improvement. Meanwhile, the burdens weighing on agriculture, far from decreasing, were increasing. So much so that in the early months of 1937 (the 1936 agricultural season had been very poor due to weather conditions), the farmers' discontent and concerns reached such a point that the Fascist Farmers' Confederation felt compelled to warn the Minister of Corporations and the Secretary of the National Fascist Party of the danger that a further spread of "discouragement" and "distress" could stifle "every spirit of initiative" and sap "all energy and activity," "with extremely serious repercussions on the nation's economy, of which agriculture constitutes the fundamental basis"19.

Judging by the situation, it might seem that—despite Fascism's repeatedly affirmed ruralist principles, Mussolini's conviction that a strong agricultural sector was necessary to both stimulate and regulate industrial development, and his constant declarations on the need to develop and enhance agriculture,

19 The letter, signed by the president of the Confederation, summarized the situation as follows: "The numerous recent social welfare measures, along with the increase in wages and in the prices of other factors of production (fertilizers, machinery, etc.), have significantly raised the production costs of all agricultural products, affecting farm budgets. In addition, farmers have been burdened—through the contribution they are called upon to make to the nation via the loan and the extraordinary tax—with new and significant financial burdens, to which others will be added as a result of initiatives to

restructure the rural credit union and the announced extension of family allowances to agricultural workers.

“Other burdens imposed—solely on the agricultural sector—by overriding requirements (the inability, in many cases, to use machinery, forcing a reliance instead on more costly human labor; the mandate to employ specific fixed quotas of labor; the obligation to perform, during the winter season, extraordinary work of little or no practical use in order to alleviate unemployment, etc.) contribute to placing the agricultural economy in a more precarious position, whereas this sector—having only just emerged from the crisis it has been struggling with in recent years—would need a period of stable and profitable work to be able to meet, in the very interest of creditors and financial institutions, the commitments undertaken in the past, and to heal the wounds that have opened up in certain sectors.

“It is true that, in line with the increased production costs, the prices of agricultural products—thanks to the providential intervention of the Government and the Party—have risen, and many of them have reached sufficiently profitable levels; but unfortunately, these gains have been practically nullified by the absolute decline in production volume compared to last year, due to adverse seasonal conditions.

“According to the results of a survey conducted by this Confederation, the value of gross agricultural production for the year 1935 amounted to L. 24,204,875,700, valuing the products at the prices prevailing at that time; the corresponding production for 1936, however, when the quantities produced are valued at today’s prices, amounts to L. 2 3 171004 8 00: agricultural activity thus generated over one billion less than in the previous year. This shortfall rises to over one and a half billion if one considers that—without taking into account the loan and the extraordinary tax—the new burdens mentioned above have increased production costs by approximately 300 million” (ACS, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Cabinet, Proceedings [1937–39], file 3-1-1/998).

not to allow the rural population to fall below 50 percent of the total population and to improve the standard of living of farmers[20]—after the war in Ethiopia, agriculture was sacrificed to industry and, in particular, to the need to develop those sectors necessary to enable a truly self-sufficient economy. In reality, such an impression is unjustified. If one takes into account the extremely heavy burdens weighing on the state budget, it must in fact be acknowledged that agriculture was by no means sacrificed. It was simply that—in accordance with autarkic logic—the investments allocated to it were primarily indirect and, in the regime’s plans, intended to yield results over the long term. Since autarky was the primary objective, for the time being the greatest efforts were directed not so much at addressing the ills afflicting agriculture as at creating the preconditions for its self-sufficiency. Specifically, as established in October 1938 by the Supreme Commission for Autarky, the two issues considered to be the most critical— cereal cultivation and animal husbandry, were to be resolved: the former through the relaunch of comprehensive land reclamation (which was expected to expand the area under cereal cultivation to 5 million hectares and achieve an annual production of 90 million quintals of wheat and 35 million quintals of durum wheat), and the latter through a series of water management projects in the Pre-Alpine lake region, in Central Italy and especially in Southern Italy, which—by enabling adequate forage production—would have made it possible to bring livestock farming up to the level of national demand (and recoup the costs through increased tax revenue)21. It was estimated that this complex of projects would require five to seven years of work (the final phase was to be completed in 1945) and an expenditure of approximately ten billion, five billion to be borne entirely by the state, with the remainder, under special favorable terms, provided by private investors22.

In this context, the economic and political efforts made during these years—and especially between

1938 and 1940—to revive the comprehensive land reclamation program, which had been significantly slowed first by the Great Depression and then by the war in Ethiopia, take on particular significance. Initially, in addition to the Agro Romano, the Bassa Friulana, and the Ferrara area, the greatest efforts were concentrated in the Volturno and Tavoliere di Puglia regions, considered the areas where land reclamation could ensure the quickest and highest returns. Subsequently, land reclamation was launched in Sicily, and plans were made for similar projects in Sardinia.

The last and most ambitious of these initiatives—the colonization of Sicilian large estates[23]—given the time it was launched, in January 1940, has often been regarded as an essentially propaganda-driven operation, aimed primarily at diverting the attention of southern farmers from the imminent danger of war and at providing employment for a certain number of unemployed people. It cannot be ruled out that considerations of this kind may also have played a part in the conception of the "assault on the Sicilian latifundia"; and it is certainly a fact that the initiative was promoted to the fullest extent by the regime's propaganda apparatus, even more so than other land reclamation projects and the very founding of Carbonia, Arsia, Guidonia, Aprilia, and Pomezia—the last "new cities of Fascism." That said, however, too many arguments stand in the way of accepting such a reductive assessment of the initiative: a) its extremely high economic cost (the state's share of the expense alone was estimated at one billion); b) the political difficulties it could have caused the regime with the nobility and the absentee landowning bourgeoisie, who were no longer able to have land reclamation laws amended as had happened in 1925–26, but who remained extremely sensitive to anything they considered contrary to their interests;24 c) the body of research that underpinned it and which, however one may judge it from a technical and economic standpoint, attests to a remarkable commitment—so much so that projects which could not be carried out at the time due to the outbreak of war were often resumed, sometimes with only minor modifications, in the postwar period; d) its perfect alignment, both economically and ideologically, with the fundamental objectives of autarky and ruralism. From an economic standpoint, the "assault on large estates" aimed—as Mussolini had stated as early as the summer of *3725 and as the Supreme Commission for

23 For an overview of the concepts underlying the reclamation of Sicilian large estates, see ibid., pp. 203 ff. and especially 244 ff. For an initial, highly negative assessment of the entire operation, see M. Stampacchia, "The 'Assault' on Sicilian Large Estates in 1939–43," in *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, October 1978, pp. 586 ff. In March 1940, the colonization plan was the subject of a detailed report by the U.S. Consulate in Palermo, which was critical of the technical aspects but highly interesting from a political perspective. The report states that the plan was not aimed at increasing production, but above all at improving the living conditions of the workers, "and this is a purely socialist objective" (ASAE, General Secretariat, p. 239).

24 Private landowners were expected to contribute approximately one and a half billion lire toward the land reclamation projects. Those who were unwilling or unable to carry out the transformation of their land as required by law could entrust the task to the designated colonization agency by transferring a portion of their property to it in lieu of payment. Those who failed to comply could be expropriated. The law was not intended to target property ownership; on the contrary, it benefited those who had the means to carry out the required work (so much so that in its first year of implementation, the commitments undertaken by landowners exceeded expectations); undoubtedly, however, it led to a reduction in land ownership, albeit while ensuring that landowners would not have to sell their property at a loss.

25 Mussolini's first reference to what would later be commonly referred to as the "assault on large estates" dates back to August 20, 1937, in Palermo. See Mussolini, XXVIII, pp. 239 ff. The concepts

articulated on this occasion were reiterated by the “Duce” a little less than two years later at Palazzo Venezia: autarchy would subsequently transform the cultivation of the reclaimed areas (approximately 500,000 hectares) from extensive to intensive farming, thereby increasing both employment and production. From an ideological standpoint, in turn, the planned creation of twenty thousand farm units —equipped with inter-farm roads, irrigation canals, and aqueducts, and centered around about a hundred new rural villages[26]—was intended not only to concretely demonstrate the regime’s social commitment and its ability to effectively begin reducing “social distances” — also permanently tie a mass of peasant families and workers in related and induced activities to the land, with the threefold result of a) putting an end to the extreme concentration of this mass in the old urban centers (in Sicily, according to the 1936 census, the population living in scattered dwellings was 10 percent, while the national average was 26 percent) and to its tendency to emigrate; b) to promote demographic growth (“Your land will be able to feed twice the population it has today, because Sicily must become—and will become—one of the most fertile regions on earth,” Mussolini had said in Palermo on August 20, 1937); c) to contribute to the formation of the Fascist “new man”: by stimulating the “rural virtues” of the populations involved and, in particular, by turning the settlers placed on the farms into pioneers, while at the same time testing and “selecting” the “moral energies” of the landowners, a “spontaneous mobilization and selection of human energies” would be brought about, which was supposed to constitute—as was written[27]— “the great leaven that will stir up all of Sicilian life.”

The argument made regarding agriculture can also be partially applied to industry. We say “partially” because, while a portion of the industrial development programs established within the framework of the autarkic policy was—as with agriculture—halted by the war and, even earlier, on July 20, 1939, when the land reclamation plan was officially made public. See ibid., XXIX, pp. 304 ff.

26 In 1942–43, the following of the planned land reclamation projects had been completed:

Dams	1
Lifting stations	1
Irrigation canals	52 km
Aqueducts	15 km
Land reclamation roads	76 km
Watering troughs	48
Wells	191
Rural hamlets	11
Farmhouses	3,043

As of August 31, 1942, 1,634 families—totaling 11,794 people—had been settled on the colonized lands, generally under colonization or improved sharecropping contracts.

Although the economy was plunged into serious difficulties by the combined effects of a trade deficit, a drastic decline in remittances from emigrants and in tourism, and a severe crisis in gold reserves, a portion of industrial production (far more substantial than in agriculture) was nevertheless achieved, so much so that in *37–38 the industrial production index returned to its 1929 level, prior to the “Great Depression,” and in the following two years it continued to grow; by 1939, the trade balance (including trade with the colonies) was in surplus for the first time in over sixty years, albeit at the cost of a profound transformation of trade flows (see the attached tables). Much could be said about the characteristics, limitations, and distortions of this development, even though to this day the autarkic (and wartime) period remains the one most lacking in specific studies—so much so that even regarding the most general characteristics of autarkic policy, ideas are often extremely vague, and there is no

shortage of those who consider it to be one and the same as a war economy (as was the case in Germany), whereas the most important objective it sought to achieve was essentially maximum exports with minimum imports.[28] For the purposes of our discussion, however, it suffices to focus on just a few aspects. As remarkable as it was,

Foreign Trade 1934–39 (in millions of 1939 lire: data from the Ministry of Finance).

With foreign countries			With the colonies	
1934	1939	% change	1939	
Imports of raw materials	5,584.9	4,454.4	-20.24	
Semi-processed raw materials	2,540.4	2,254.9	—11.24	
Finished goods	2,477.0	1,869.1	-24.54	
Foodstuffs	1,728.8	1,442.4	-16.57	
Total	12,331.1	IO 020.8	-18.74	276.0
Exports of Raw Materials	972.6	748.1	-23.08	
Semi-processed Raw Materials	I 766.2	I 840.9	+4.23	
Finished goods	2,759.9	3,228.7	+16.99	
Foodstuffs	2,576.2	2,634.6	+2.27	
Total	8,074.9	8,452.3	+4.67	2,349.3

The growth that industry experienced in the four years following the Ethiopian War is not the most important factor for those who approach the Italian economic reality of the time from a primarily general political perspective and with the intention of grasping some of its social and political consequences. More important is the transformation of the productive base that took place during these years—largely as a continuation (and crystallization) of trends already underway and closely linked to the impact that the “Great Depression” had had in Italy and the ways in which attempts were made to address it, as well as a consequence of the emergence, in the immediately preceding years, of the “industrial state” and the “banking state” (the creation of IMI and IRI, new banking legislation, etc.), and to some extent due to the autarkic orientation and rearmament policy imposed by the regime.[2] Key features of this transformation included increased

Italy’s foreign trade with the most important countries in 1934 and 1939.

Imports				Exports					
1934 in lire	1939	1939	% change in 1939 compared to 1934	1934 in lire	1939	1939	% change in 1939 compared to 1934		
Argentina	446.2	I53J	-65.69	353.9	214.1	-39.50			
Belgium	373.0	198.1	-46.89	187.0	116.0	-37.67			
Brazil	207.4	I5U5	-26.95	109.3	85.4	-21.87			
Egypt	252.4	129.1	-48.85	196.8	174.5	-11.33			
France	711.0	153.5	-7,841	572.2	242.8	-57.57			
Germany (Austria)	2,281.3		3,039.3	+33.23	1,554.0	1,897.7	+40.06		
British India	574.8	123.3	-78.55	192.7	118.2	-38.66			
England	1,150.2		567.6	-50.65	860.5	515.1	-40.14		
Yugoslavia	331.8	246.4	-25.74	228.2	304.6	+33.48			
Netherlands	220.7	1334	-39.56	218.7	192.9	-11.80			
Poland	153.4	262.5	+71.12	I2o.7	87.1	-27.84			
Romania	196.6	415.6	+in.39	122.1	288.0	+138.69			
United States	1,556.6		979.4	-37.08	630.7	772.7	+22.51		

Switzerland	475.9	336.4	-29.31	712.8	579.7	-18.67					
Hungary	1,604	422.9	+163.65		211.9	24M	+13.92				
USSR	358.0	43.4	-87.88	201.7	56.6	-71.94					
Other countries		2,881.4		2,665.3		+7.50	1,601.7		2,565.5		+60.17
Overall	12,33UI		IO 020.8		-18.74	8,074.9		8,452.3		+4.67	

diversification of the industrial base and, above all, a strong emphasis—compared to other sectors—on heavy industry (steel, machinery, mining) and the chemical industry, considered key sectors both from the general perspective of self-sufficiency and from the specific perspective of wartime needs. The result was that the productive base shifted in favor of industries producing capital goods and at the expense of those producing consumer goods. Relatively few new industries, however, emerged as a direct result of the autarkic policy; according to an estimate by the industrial sector in the immediate postwar period (which was likely biased toward underreporting), no more than one percent of the entire industrial complex that existed before the policy was implemented.[30] As for the increase in production, while it was certainly significant in some sectors (solid fuels, aluminum, artificial fibers, cellulose, refined mineral oils), in terms of overall value and especially in relation to population growth (which increased by one-eighth between 1929 and 1942), it was, on the whole, relatively modest and came at the cost of undoubtedly very heavy economic and social burdens and distortions—not least the incomplete mobilization of resources and only partial rationalization in the modern sense. There were various reasons for this relatively modest overall increase in production. Among the main ones were the lack of foreign investment and the growing difficulty in obtaining credit abroad—both consequences of the international stance taken by Mussolini— and the gold reserve crisis that, in 1938, led to a significant reduction in imports, which, in turn, on the one hand, reduced the activity of a whole range of industries and, on the other hand, also led to a contraction in exports—upon which the development of the autarkic policy and the very fulfillment of its basic preconditions largely depended.[31]

Despite all this, it cannot be denied that the results were positive for the regime. If—beyond the miraculous claims of propaganda and certain totalitarian interpretations of autarky put forward by some of the more fanatical fascists—one keeps firmly in mind the insurmountable limitations that stood in the way of the realization of a truly autarkic economy, it is a fact that, as La Francesca and Gualerni have noted[32], on the eve of the war, the industrial complex was certainly more diverse and comprehensive than it had been a decade earlier and—except for technological aspects and, obviously, the supply of raw materials—was not inferior to that of the other great powers, both in terms of the efficiency of its facilities and the variety of its production. And this was certainly no small achievement, especially when one considers: 1) that in 1940 the autarkic program was far from being fully realized (a typical example is the steel industry plan, which—despite Mussolini's view that the steel industry, "after that of bread," the sector "where maximum autarky must be achieved," was still far from the desired self-sufficiency in the event of a conflict[33]), partly due to objective difficulties, but largely due to the conflicting views and interests within the economic sphere and the obstacles and delays they caused; 2) that—as we shall see—Mussolini believed the war would break out later than it actually did (and thus thought he had more time to pursue the autarkic policy) and that it would be a short war—that is, one requiring an economic effort that was relatively limited in duration and therefore less affected by the scarcity of certain raw materials.

Significant consequences of the transformations brought about by the autarkic policy were, on the one hand, the increasingly important role played by IRI industries (on the eve of the war, they accounted for 80 percent of shipbuilding, 77 percent of cast iron, 67 percent of ferrous materials, 50 percent of steel and armaments, 23 percent of mechanical production) and, on the other hand, the intensification of the already marked (though, compared to other countries up to that point, not exceptional) trend toward

economic and productive concentration in the hands of an increasingly small number of men (a large portion of whom also sat on the boards of directors of state-controlled industries), with all the easily foreseeable consequences—primarily economic, but also political. More telling than any discourse on this subject is what Ettore Conti—a man who had firsthand knowledge of this reality like very few others—noted in his diary on September 15, 1939:[34]

At a time when it is claimed daily that we are moving toward the people, a financial oligarchy has emerged that, in the industrial sphere, is reminiscent of ancient feudalism.

Production is, for the most part, controlled by a few groups, each of which

For the background to this trend, see R. Romeo, “Historical Aspects of the Development of Large-Scale Industry in Italy,” in *Storia contemporanea*, January–March 1970, pp. 19 ff., which cites an interesting document denouncing this situation, sent to Mussolini in November 1933.

is headed by a single man. Agnelli, Cini, Volpi, Pirelli, Donegani, Falck, and very few others completely dominate the various branches of industry.

In Italy, there are more than ten thousand joint-stock companies engaged in industrial activities, representing a nominal capital of forty billion: of these, 32 are grouped into just 500 companies, meaning that nearly four-fifths of the capital is held by five percent of the joint-stock companies; and even within this modest fraction, the same names often recur.

Still on the subject of the transformations brought about by the autarkic policy, it is important for the purposes of our discussion to note that they all essentially took place outside the corporatist system. While in previous years this system had largely run on empty, it now practically ceased to have any active impact on the country’s economic and social life and was reduced—in practice, at least, since in words its function and its “progress” continued to be extolled at every opportunity—to a bureaucratic liaison body that, at best, served as a research office and, at worst, merely ratified decisions made by the government or already negotiated among the Confederations themselves. So much so that it is no exaggeration to say that the corporatist system launched with great fanfare between the end of ’33 and the beginning of >’34 not only completely failed during these years—confirming in spades the fears and more or less veiled criticisms that had already been raised within fascist circles as early as ’35–’36 regarding its ability—as it had been implemented —to effectively influence the country’s social and economic reality and to truly constitute the “third way” between liberalism and socialism, between capitalism and collectivism[35]—but was also—silently yet concretely—suspended by the regime itself with regard to a whole series of its powers and, in particular, those pertaining to autarkic policy and, therefore, to economic development. To realize this, one need only read the speech delivered in the Chamber of Deputies by Minister F. Lantini on March 12, 1938, which clearly reveals the actual limits of the Ministry of Corporations’ authority and scope of action,[36] and, above all, pay attention to what, in our view, is the most important and significant event of those years concerning the Corporations: the reduction in January 1939—following the failure of the Supreme Commission for Autarky, established by the Central Corporative Committee and which soon proved to be a “mere organ of orchestration and display”[37]—of the corporative institutions to mere technical-bureaucratic bodies of the Interministerial Committee for Autarky[38].

As far as private economic activities were concerned, the autarkic policy was practically conducted directly by the state through a series of regulatory and disciplinary measures implemented at all levels —from the credit sector to imports and exports, to taxation (exemptions, preferential tariffs), to

subsidies, grants, and guaranteed minimum prices, to the setting and control of retail prices, etc. This type of intervention did not call private economic activity into question and, in many cases, favored it in the short term. However, it significantly reduced the scope for corporate autonomy and production choices and—most importantly—forced it into a state of growing dependence on the state. A condition that even the most short-sighted or pro-regime groups and figures in the economic sphere, who had

All members of the Central Corporate Committee were part of the Supreme Commission for Autarky. Its meetings were also attended by the presidents of the Accademia d'Italia, the National Research Council, the Colonial Corporate Councils, the Institute for Industrial Research, the Italian General Petroleum Company, the Italian Coal Company, and the Italian Metal Minerals Company, the General Commissioner for War Production, the head of the Inspectorate for the Protection of Savings and the Administration of Credit, the Secretary General of the Supreme Defense Commission, A. De Stefani and G. O. Pession of the Academy of Italy, and A. Giannini of the National Research Council; as well as, in their capacity as experts, A. Pirelli; Senators Bocciardo, Ferrari, Jacobini, and Tofani; and National Councilors Cambi, De Ambris, Donegani, Garbacelo, Lojacono, Marinotti, Motta, Serono, and Rocca. And, representing the press, the president and editor-in-chief of the "Agenzia Stefani" and the editors-in-chief of the following daily newspapers: "Il Popolo d'Italia," "Il Corriere della Sera," "Il Corriere Padano," "La Gazzetta del Popolo," "Il Gazzettino," "Il Giornale di Genova," "Il Giornale d'Italia," "Il Giornale di Sicilia," "Il Lavoro Fascista," "Il Mattino," "Il Messaggero," "La Nazione," "L'Ora," "Il Piccolo di Roma," "Il Piccolo di Trieste," "Il Popolo di Roma," "Il Popolo di Trieste," "Il Regime Fascista," "Il Resto del Carlino," "Il Secolo-Sera," "Il Sole," "La Stampa," "Il Telegrafo," "Il Tevere," "La Tribuna."

It is clear that such a bloated body could not function and ended up serving as nothing more than a propaganda mouthpiece. Hence the establishment in January 1939 of the Interministerial Committee for Autarky, chaired by the "Duce" and composed of the ministers of Corporations, Finance, Agriculture and Forestry, Communications, and Trade and Currency; the secretary of the National Fascist Party (PNF); the Chief of the General Staff; the president of the National Research Council; the Commissioner General for War Production; the governor of the Bank of Italy; and the secretary of the Supreme Defense Commission. The decree-law that established it provided, among other things, that the Committee could "notwithstanding existing provisions, authorize new industrial facilities, require industrial enterprises to adopt specific production processes, establishing the procedures for doing so, and set product prices." The Supreme Commission for Autarky was not dissolved, but in practice it was reduced to a purely representative and propaganda role.

It is interesting to note that on the eve of July 25, 1943, a measure was being prepared (to be viewed primarily within the context of the corporatist revival advocated during the war years by certain Fascist sectors, which will be discussed in the next volume) that was intended to transfer to the Central Corporatist Committee all the powers assigned in 1939 to the Interministerial Committee for Autarky, as well as those assigned to the Committee of Ministers for the Defense of Savings and the Exercise of Credit and to the Interministerial Coordination Committee for the Procurement, Distribution, and Pricing of Industrial and Agricultural Products and Services, acs. Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Cabinet (1937–39), "phase" 18-12/3051, and 1939–43, phase 18-1/20875.

with it came greater bargaining power—they had always sought by every means to avoid this—and that the undoubted economic advantages which, for the time being, accompanied it (a near-monopoly in many sectors, highly profitable prices, the certainty that production would be absorbed, etc.) certainly did not—as time went on—weigh enough to counterbalance and thus make the situation more acceptable, especially for those among them who could look to the future and realized that by

increasingly emphasizing the autarkic choice[39], the negative aspects of the situation would become ever more serious and the positive ones (even setting aside the danger of war) ever more limited and uncertain. And foremost among these was the issue—sharply highlighted by S. Romano in his biography of Volpi[40]—of the "bureaucratization" of the economy in relation to political power.

According to its proponents—and not just the most ardent ones—among the many benefits that the autarkic policy was supposed to bring was the ability to employ a large portion, if not all, of the unemployed workforce and to ease the pressure on the land through land reclamation and colonization. In reality, until the first substantial call-ups for military service took place, the decline in unemployment was very slow and by no means complete. As a result of the end of the war in Ethiopia,[41] unemployment actually increased, despite the fact that General Dall'Olio, Commissioner General for War Production, had hastened to suggest to Mussolini certain measures to reduce—or at least postpone as much as possible—layoffs by the war industries.[42] In October 1935, at the outbreak of hostilities, the officially registered unemployed numbered 602,058; one year later, after the war had ended, the figure had risen to 696,982: 128,798 in agriculture, 476,733 in industry, and 91,451 in commerce and the service sector in general. Another year later, the number had fallen by about 46,000 in industry, but by only 30,000 overall. In 1938 and 1939, there was a further decrease, partly due to the transfer of the "twenty thousand" settlers to Libya to take possession of the farm units prepared by Balbo.[45] On the eve of Italy's entry into the war, however, the officially recorded number of unemployed was still about half a million. A result, as can be seen, that is hardly impressive, but one that is easily explained: generally by the fact that, as we have said, the autarkic policy led to the establishment of only a small number of new businesses during these years, and specifically, both by the difficulties in the trade balance and the resulting contraction in imports—which not only slowed new initiatives but also prevented many companies from operating at full capacity, leading Mussolini himself to consider "possible factory closures, unemployment, etc.… 'infinitely lesser evils than the drain on our reserves, the depletion of which could have incalculable international consequences'"[45], and also with the widespread tendency in industry to avoid hiring new workers—even when necessary—and to prefer, as he put it: "How can we ensure that, as industries and labor return to their natural course, the layoff of workers is kept to the absolute minimum so that hardship is as limited as possible, and harmful dispersal is avoided?

39 For industrialists, autarky was to be understood "as the maximum technically and economically possible enhancement of the nation's productive energies and resources" (G. Balella, Giuseppe Volpi, President of the Confederation of Industrialists, in Giuseppe Volpi. Memoirs and Testimonies, Venice 1959, p. 78), without, however, turning the Italian economy into a closed economy. In this regard, a "contrastive" reading of the speech on "industrial discipline under autarky," delivered to the industrialists' union leaders in November 1938 by Confindustria President Volpi, is significant. In it (see "L'Organizzazione industriale," November 18, 1938), Volpi, while enthusiastically aligning himself with the regime's directives, insisted very vigorously on reaffirming two key points: a) that autarky should not lead to the total isolation of the national economy from the economies of other countries: "Autarky for our country—as, indeed, for all countries—cannot be achieved in an absolute sense: it will always be necessary to import a certain quantity of raw materials that cannot be produced domestically or replaced with domestic substitutes, and, at least in normal times, the importation of finished products cannot be avoided as a means of enabling us to export our own finished products"; b) that exports should be maximized.

41 In May 1935, when the call-ups had begun, the PNF had sought to persuade industries to hire an equal number of workers—preferably from the same family—to replace the employees who had been called up. Many industries, however, had preferred not to replace those called up, and Confindustria

(concerned above all with defending the principle of free choice in hiring labor) had sided with them; see S. Romano, Giuseppe Volpi, op. cit., p. 213.

"First of all, we must return to the normal 40-hour workweek or, at most—in truly necessary exceptional cases—to 48 hours… but no more.

"Second, proceed gradually with layoffs—first women, then men; first those who can easily find employment in other industries, and then the others. Temporarily reduce the 40-hour workweek if necessary to delay layoffs, taking into account special needs and all the interests at stake.

"Furthermore, each industry must strive to employ as many workers as possible without rushing the work, because we must persist in saving time—Endurance is Victory—Instead of demanding 84, 72, 65, 60, or 52 hours per week for industries with a surplus of orders, settle for the 40-hour week, and if anything, increase the workforce, or at most extend the workweek to 48 hours." (ACS, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Cabinet, AA: 1934–1936, b. 805, file 1-1-10/4595). Despite these intentions, a little over three months later, the General Commissariat for War Production authorized the 1,200 companies under its control—and in particular those working for the Air Force and Navy—to extend the weekly workweek to a maximum of 60 hours (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Minutes, session of October 10, 1936).

Other sources provide higher figures: 1936: 700,483; 1937: 722,378; 1938: 712,454; 1939: 669,394; 1940: 599,766. See "Review of Labor Statistics," February 1949, p. [illegible number]

45 See F. Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche*, op. cit., II, p. 241 (February 13, 1938), and also p. 213 (July 9, 1937). Mussolini was aware that the decline in imports "certainly had social consequences," but he believed that one should not "be overly concerned" about the matter. "All of this," he wrote to Guarneri, "can be overcome and, in any case, will be monitored and kept under close watch." See ibid., pp. 240 and 213.

This involved making greater use of the existing workforce. Adjusting working hours (and shifts)—increasing them (sometimes up to sixty) but very often also by reducing them (a 1939 survey of just over one-third of employed workers revealed that 19.1 percent of them worked fewer than forty hours) depending on needs was, in fact, economically very advantageous for the company, since, by manipulating shifts, it was possible, in extreme cases, to achieve a forty-eight-hour workweek without paying overtime. Nor was this hindered by the forty-hour workweek (instead of forty-eight)—introduced in 1934 to address unemployment to some extent (at a cost to workers of about 17 percent of their wages, only partially offset by the introduction of family allowances)—and reintroduced (after a brief hiatus during the war in Ethiopia) from March 1937 to November 1939—since the collective bargaining agreements in force authorized exceptions to it in special cases, and the corporate bodies almost always endorsed them, despite protests from the unions.[46]

The situation regarding wages and salaries—and, more generally, the repercussions of the autarkic policy on living conditions—is similar in some respects but more complex.

During the Ethiopian War and in the months immediately following, the cost of living had risen significantly. The Vannutelli index stood at 77.2 in '34, 78.3 in '35, and 84.2 in '36. The index from ISTAT's "Price Bulletin" of January 15, 1937, recorded an increase from 81.52 to 85.98 between December 1935 and December 1936 (and from 76.35 to 80.50 for the cost of food alone). A survey

conducted by the South African legation in Rome (on retail prices of twenty-three basic items) and reliable sources within the political police, in turn, indicated an increase between September ’35 and September ’36 of between 27 and 30 percent, followed by a further 15 percent increase at the end of January ’37, largely triggered by the devaluation of the lira on October 5 (on which occasion the National Fascist Party [PNF] was tasked with monitoring and “defending” prices, especially those of basic necessities—a task the party, however, managed to fulfill only partially) and by the scarcity of goods resulting from the depletion of stocks due to

* Compliance with the forty-hour workweek was the subject of a conference organized in 1937 by the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers, which, on April 9, 1937, also made an explicit appeal to the Minister of Corporations, highlighting how circumventing the forty-hour law distorted “the concept underlying the reduction of the workweek to 40 hours” and harmed workers both economically (wage reduction) and physically (increased workload). See ACS, T. Cianetti, FASE. “40-Hour Workweek.”

penalties and the poor harvest of 1936–48. Faced with such a massive increase in the cost of living, wages were raised by 8–10 percent between July and August of 1936. However, the increase was certainly not enough to restore balance with the cost of living and was offset by new price hikes (including that of bread, which Starace tried to postpone as long as possible to prevent it from occurring immediately after the wage increases and nullifying their psychological and political benefits[49]) that occurred in the following months. In short, the situation soon became so precarious that reports from the police and the party—especially those from major industrial centers—unanimously spoke of “widespread discontent over the difficulties of daily life, when daily earnings are insufficient to support a family due to the continuous rise in the cost of goods” and some even went so far as to warn against “placing too much trust in the apparent calm and loyalty to the Regime, especially if economic conditions were to worsen rather than improve”[50]. Hence the need, in April 1937, to adopt a series of measures aimed at reorganizing and strengthening general assistance for the less well-off (establishment of municipal welfare agencies) and at exercising more effective control over prices (transferred from the party to the Corporations), and, the following month, to implement a new 10 percent wage increase 5’. The following month, as had already occurred in 1936 (when the increase had ranged from 8 to 13.63 percent), the salaries of state and parastatal employees were also raised by 8 percent (and overtime pay by 10 percent).

However, just like those of the previous year, these increases also proved, on average, inadequate to keep pace with the rising cost of living, whose index recorded a continuous—albeit gradually slowing—rise: from 84.2 in 1930 to 92.2 in 1937 to 99.3 in 1938 to 103.7 in 1939- Hence the need for two further increases, both of 1 percent. One in March 1939 (with which workers’ wages rose by about 34 percent compared to the previous year) and another in March 1940. It was only with these increases—and especially with the one in 1939 (after which the ratio began to shift out of balance again in 1940)—that wages—again, on average—showed a genuine improvement in real purchasing power, as evidenced, among other things, by the growth in the share of non-food items (and, within these, “social” or luxury goods) relative to food expenditures52.

51 The need for the increase had been announced by Mussolini on April 16 while speaking to party leaders gathered at Palazzo Venezia: “It must be stated that the 1936 wage increase was absorbed by the rise in the cost of living and the introduction of the 40-hour workweek. Now it must be remembered that when prices were falling and the crisis of the system was raging, Italian workers accepted, with firm discipline, significant cuts to their wages; now that the economic recovery is underway, it is absolutely just—and therefore fascist—that their wages should be improved.” However, the speech was not made public. For the text, see ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Autographs of the Duce, b. 8,

phase XV (1937), sub-section A.

Having said this in general terms, some clarifications are necessary to obtain a true picture of the situation. The wage increases of ’37, ’39, and ’40, to which we have referred to illustrate the progression in wages, must be considered only as indicative reference points for that progression. In fact, they did not apply to all wages and salaries, but only to those of industrial workers and government employees. For other workers, such as agricultural workers[53] and private-sector employees, these figures served merely as a point of reference, which—depending on the case—was generally understood as a maximum and only rarely as a minimum. For still others, such as artisans, the reference value was even lower, and the actual increases that resulted were, except in exceptional cases, smaller. Finally, one cannot overlook the fact that even for industrial workers, the wage increases we have mentioned offer only an indicative reference point for those seeking to reconstruct the living conditions of those years. This is essentially for three reasons: 1) because wages higher than the contractual minimums were far from rare, especially in larger companies and in the metalworking, chemical, and electrical sectors; 2) because real wages varied depending on working hours, and these hours gradually increased in certain sectors or companies, even though overall the increase between 1930 and 1939 was modest (from 157 hours per month to 160, with a maximum of 163 in 1937); 3) because real wages must be considered in light of their increase due to family allowances and a series of wage supplements introduced or improved during these years (Christmas bonus, pay for midweek holidays and vacation, severance pay, and retirement benefits): an estimate by Vannutelli found that family allowances accounted for between 10 and 15 percent of wages in 1936–40, while other wage supplements amounted to around 6 percent.[54]

54 See Zamagni, “Wage Dynamics in the Industrial Sector,” in *The Italian Economy during the Fascist Period*, edited by P. Ciocca and G. Toniolo, Bologna 1976, pp. 342 ff., accepts Vannutelli’s estimate and concludes that, as a rough approximation, it can be assumed that “wages, net of social contributions and including family allowances and other additional components, increased by about 5% in 1935–36, 10% between 1937 and 1939, and 15% in 1940.”

Given the scarcity—not to say the absence—of specific studies and the fragmentary nature of the basic documentation regarding the living conditions of Italians in the years between 1936 and 1940, it is extremely difficult to draw precise conclusions from the available data, especially if this is intended to better clarify the value to be attributed—in terms of “consensus”— — to the economic difficulties and hardship that characterized this period and which, in more ways than one, appear different from those that had characterized the preceding years—first the “quota novanta” period and then the “Great Crisis.” By integrating the available evidence with what is provided by contemporary sources and, above all, with the findings from the vast array of police reports and reports from PNF informants on “public sentiment” and the various manifestations of economic hardship, it is nevertheless possible to sketch a picture—or, rather, a mosaic, since this is essentially a task of “piecing things together”—which, while certainly broad in scope, should not be too far from reality.

The first and most evident fact that emerges from this mosaic is that all the pieces document a reality of widespread hardship. A more in-depth examination, however, leads us to distinguish at least three fundamental categories of pieces: those that refer to situations of persistent, essentially static hardship, which, as such, are noted in the reports with brief, routine mentions, except on specific occasions that temporarily exacerbated the distress or sparked hopes for an improvement in the situation; those that are not only ever-present but also reveal a continuously growing level of hardship and its spread; and, finally, those that reveal a hardship that is ever-present but more pronounced in certain localities and follows a pattern of first increasing and then decreasing.

Typical of the first category are the discontent in the agricultural sector and that among civil servants (and, to a certain extent, among artisans). These are two cases of serious discontent, but ones that, on the whole, appear to be the most passive and resigned and, from the standpoint of public support, the least dangerous to the regime—and are not infrequently counterbalanced by a strong measure of trust in the "Duce." Discontent in the agricultural sector emerged above all during particularly unfavorable economic conditions and in response to the various tax hikes recorded in those years.[55] Discontent among civil servants arose especially after wage increases were granted to factory workers, as they awaited the extension of those increases to themselves and immediately thereafter. This sentiment was always accompanied by a sort of resentment and jealousy toward the workers, who were considered to receive preferential economic treatment. A typical example is the following excerpt from a police report, dated March 29, 1939, devoted entirely to the expectations and hopes of Roman civil servants:[56]

55 On August 7, 1936, a tax reform was enacted aimed at improving and streamlining financial administration and preventing tax evasion; among other things, it provided for the establishment (which never took place) of a tax registry. Two months later, a progressive extraordinary tax on dividends from commercial companies was instituted, along with a 25-year extraordinary property tax. A year later, a one-time tax on the capital of joint-stock companies was introduced. In November 1938, a one-time, one-off tax was also imposed on the capital of industrial and commercial enterprises. This was followed by the introduction, in October 1939, of an ordinary wealth tax and, in January 1940, of the general income tax. See S. La Francesca, *The Economic Policy of Fascism*, op. cit., pp. 88 ff., which estimates the projected revenue from the new taxes at approximately 11 billion, nearly one-tenth of the national income.

It is generally lamented that this category of silent state workers is largely overlooked, and in this regard it is said that all the relevant authorities are concerned with the working-class masses—who are the ones who might cause trouble—all too easily forgetting that the working-class masses, in general, have a monthly income far higher than that of the poor office worker.

In fact, it is observed that the white-collar worker is generally almost always the sole breadwinner in the household; not only that, but he also bears the burden of raising children—ensuring they receive an education and are introduced into society in accordance with the social expectations demanded by his class.

In the working-class environment, on the other hand, a family's sources of income are diverse and by no means insignificant.

In fact, it is said that in a working-class family consisting of parents and four children over the age of fourteen, there are generally five people who contribute to the household income each month, whereas in the case of the poor office worker, it is always just one—the head of the household.

The second category, on the other hand, encompasses the unease and discontent of the city's productive middle classes, ranging from the highest echelons—finance, industry, and large-scale commerce—to the lowest, such as small business owners and small-scale professionals, etc. The informants' reports are full of references to this, and such references increase every year. And they often take on such a dramatic tone, laden with political observations (implicit, but often explicit as well), that some local officials, in an effort to challenge their credibility with their superiors, went so far as to claim that they could not "have been penned by anyone other than a genuine anti-fascist, who views events and facts

through the prism of his own bad faith."57 Leaving aside for the moment concerns about the international situation and Mussolini's foreign policy—which were also very much alive but followed a more irregular course, with ups and downs depending on international political events— what emerges from these reports—to the point of overshadowing everything else—is a growing concern and discontent regarding the economic situation and the autarkic policy, unanimously considered the primary cause of this precarious situation. The continuous rise in prices and the cost of living, the scarcity of certain goods, the poor quality of many autarkic products, the growing tax burden, the proliferation of bankruptcies and bounced checks,[58] the state's increasing interference in economic life, and the ever-shrinking scope left for personal and private initiative in general are the most recurring themes, accompanied by a state of mind that is, on the one hand, increasingly impatient and, on the other, one of helplessness—indicating a strong and widespread decline in support for and trust in Mussolini himself, though this has never been accompanied by any concrete commitment to change the situation (for which, in a few rare cases, the greatest hope lies in a "moderating" intervention by the sovereign). Among the countless reports we could cite, we have chosen one that, due to its tone, the time period—February 1939—and the insight it reveals about the informant, seems to us to sum up well the unease and discontent of the productive bourgeoisie59:

For trends in civil servants' salaries, see ISTAT, *Summary of Historical Statistics*, op. cit., pp. 204 ff.

58 In 1938, bankruptcies and protested bills were on the rise. A summary note of the statistical data for September 1939, forwarded to Mussolini by the president of the Central Institute of Statistics, shows that in the first eight months of 1939, 4,694 bankruptcies were declared, compared to 3,725 in the same period of the previous year (a 26 percent increase) and 543,030 protested bills of exchange were issued for 336,823,000 lire, compared to 399,337 for 277,852,000 lire the previous year (an increase of 36 percent and 21.1 percent), ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Ordinary Correspondence (1922–1943), b. 509,560, file: "Central Institute of Statistics."

59 ACS, PNF, Political Situation of the Provinces, "Milan," informational report dated February 4, 1939. With regard more specifically to industrial entrepreneurs, what a police informant from Genoa wrote around the same time, on January 25, 1939, is quite interesting: "Employers, in the very early days—that is, when Fascism was violently opposed to the activities of the labor chambers and leagues, activities which, it must be acknowledged, were veering toward Bolshevism—believed they had found the truest and best antidote and embraced Fascism with the utmost confidence and, we believe, with considerable financial resources. The creation of the Corporations—both for employers and workers—placed on an equal footing, with the same rights, and with discussions conducted as equals; indeed, due to interpretations of the Duce's directives that were not always accurate, the former were often placed in a position of inferiority vis-à-vis the latter; the dependence of every industry, every business, and every activity in general on the Ministry of Corporations, which regulates or limits their development and initiatives when it deems it necessary; the levies imposed on capital and private assets; the limitation of dividends; the burdens of various contributions in favor of the working class; the lack of protection from their own representatives in the face of the assertiveness of labor union representatives; the more or less mandatory participation in all Party initiatives, even if they might run counter to individual interests—all of this has been a source of profound disappointment and has driven many away, at least spiritually, from the Party—spiritually because obvious reasons of opportunism compel them to "remain members," but nothing more. The measures gradually being taken by the Ministry only serve to widen this rift. Thus, for example, the dissolution of the employment offices—which have also been placed under the authority of the labor confederations—represents yet another limitation on

the prerogatives of employers, who are denied the right to “request specific candidates.” It is said that, given equal professional qualifications—which, however, are not judged solely by the employer—social and political criteria serve as preferential factors for job placement: such as the worker’s state of need, the number of dependent children, the length of unemployment, union membership, merits in war or for the cause of the Revolution, etc. This is all well and good, but the employer—that is, the one who bears the risk—must accept the worker sent to them without the right to choose; at least, this is how Article 1 of the new regulations governing job placement is interpreted. The system will give rise to problems, because a workforce formed in this way cannot be homogeneous, skilled, or desirable; over time, it will require radical changes, which will become indispensable, but, in the meantime, it is causing damage, widespread discontent, and truly deep-seated distress.

A deep sense of pessimism reigns in Milan’s financial circles. This is nothing new. This same pessimism prevailed in these same circles—especially in the banking sector—as recently as three years ago. It has resurfaced in Turin, Genoa, and even Florence. Indeed, while this pessimism was once confined to certain circles, it has now—judging by what has been observed over the past two years—spread throughout the entire economic sphere, reaching even the most modest business owner. This phenomenon began after the lira’s pegging.

The forms this state of mind takes are endless, and listing them all would be a never-ending task. However, they can all be reduced to a common denominator: distrust of the autarkic system and, consequently, a more or less overt disapproval of current economic methods.

All innovations—and thus also new political, social, and economic systems—clash with the resistance of conservatism, which is a flaw common to all mortals. The resistance that concerns us here is one of principle. The business world endures, but it refuses to be swayed. It may deem it appropriate to offer the broadest assurances, profess its consent, and seek to take advantage of the opportunity to further its own interests; but, in reality, the business world never ceases to lament its lost freedom of old, is irritated by the obstacles posed by the Regime’s regulations, and by the diminished value of personal initiative—which, often, was nothing more than brutal license. In the business world, one always searches in vain for a true friend of the Regime, a man who understands the current imperative need to place oneself unconditionally at the service of the Regime.

Reading the newspapers—especially if one has not been in touch with this world for some time—one is led to believe that things are changing, that we are finally moving toward sincere collaboration without any mental reservations. But invariably, one is forced to change one’s mind.

After all, it is no surprise that this is the case. In Italian economic circles, it is traditional to regard two countries in the world as the perfect economic models: England and America. These two countries are irreconcilably opposed to an economic system like the one in place in Italy; therefore, for the overwhelming majority of our businesspeople, the Italian system must necessarily be flawed.

Furthermore, one need only skim the business pages of the most authoritative foreign newspapers on economic matters to realize that our own pessimism is echoed by nearly all the voices of the international economic community. The press in all democratic countries—the so-called economically strong nations—is unanimous on this subject, and reading the article translated from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* will convince you of this.

“And let us open a parenthesis here: something can also be said about the suppression of initiatives on the part of employers; just as workers frequently felt the need for agitation and struggle, so there were

moments when employers deluded themselves—because in many cases it was simply an illusion—into believing they could impose lockouts at will and force their workforce back to work, and… let's close this parenthesis.

"I was saying that everything employers deplore gives rise to discontent; now we must not forget that discontent can be considered a veritable infectious disease that spreads rapidly and reaches all social strata, making it more widespread and deeper than one might suppose; it follows that states of tension stemming from anti-Bolshevik ideologies or imperialism—for which we are not even very mature — remain extremely superficial and are regarded as 'diversions' intended to divert attention from pressing problems, such as the high cost of living, and to make people tolerate disciplinary systems that the Italian character—at least that of the current generations—tolerates poorly, and which those charged with enforcing them, those in command, do not always know how to apply with due discretion" (ACS, Ministry of Interior, Gen. Dir. PS, Political Police Div., Cat. I, B. 217).

From a specific perspective, it is particularly interesting to see whether this state of mind, which prevails in financial, industrial, and commercial circles, can influence the rest of public opinion and the so-called "man on the street." Unfortunately, the answer must be in the affirmative. The "man in the street" is currently more susceptible than ever to the influence of this kind of pessimism, because his personal interests are being harmed by constant price increases, by the compulsion he feels to reduce his standard of living day by day, by the fear that his means will no longer suffice, and by seeing the possibility of increasing his income precluded—or at least made difficult. The "man in the street" lives in constant apprehension, which manifests itself even over the most trivial matters: because eggs have gone up by a soldo, because airmail rates to the Colonies have increased, because the prices of public entertainment have gone up, and so on. The grocer, the drugstore owner, the baker—all his suppliers—are, to him, nothing but sources of alarm: they are, after all, the outposts of the economic world, selling not only their merchandise but also the pessimism that reigns in their circles.

All too often, this takes on the form of discouragement and bitter resignation, leading people to the most absolute skepticism regarding economic matters. This state of mind is illustrated by the anecdote of that modest little man who, at the end of a lecture extolling economic successes, asked to speak and then asked the speaker: "How, then, do you explain that the price of cheese went up by two soldi again this morning?" <

It is believed that, as this mindset spreads, it could become a negative factor in the not-impossible event that the nation is called upon to mount an economic effort against tomorrow's enemy—an effort in which it would be necessary to mobilize all sources of resilience. And that it is, at present, one of the main factors contributing to the creation of that oppressive atmosphere that is growing ever heavier.

The third category concerns workers' discontent. The large number of reports devoted to it leaves no doubt: it was always alive and present in all sectors of the workforce and throughout the entire period under consideration. At its root were economic factors, but—especially in larger companies—there were also other causes related to working conditions (the organization of work rhythms and shifts, piecework, working hours that were too short or too long, etc.), to hiring and firing practices (often arbitrary and aimed solely at rehiring laid-off workers in a lower category), and to demands for union representation in the factory. Widespread throughout the country, this phenomenon was most pronounced among workers in the lowest categories[60] and in the large companies of Turin, Milan, and Genoa—cities where the cost of living was higher

60 In a report from Milan dated March 12, 1940—drafted, therefore, after the latest wage increases—we read: “The skilled worker, who earns well due to the shortage of this type of labor, will receive the same percentage increase as the majority—namely, unskilled laborers, manual laborers, etc.—who receive paltry wages compared to today’s cost of living...”

“Example—there are skilled workers who earn an average of 5 lire per hour, or 40 lire for an eight-hour workday. With the 1596 raise, the daily wage will rise to L. 46. The situation was particularly acute in areas where the vast majority of workers did not have (as was the case elsewhere) the opportunity to supplement their factory work with small-scale agricultural activities, where the causes of hardship—not immediately economic in nature—were greater and more numerous, and where there was a higher number of older workers with union experience and a socialist background. Very intense in >36, in ’37, and again in ’38, the discontent of industrial workers in >39, while continuing, lost some of its intensity—especially after the March raises—and, significantly, its underlying causes changed to a large extent. Rather than the immediately economic and wage-related grievances that had been dominant until then, other grievances came to the fore—some still fundamentally economic in nature, others more strictly union-related. Among the former were, above all, those connected to the burdens arising from social security contributions[61] and, following the increases of ’39 and especially ’40, from the application of the tax on movable wealth to higher wages and, in certain cases, the supplementary tax[62]. Among the latter were those related to working conditions: laborers, manual workers, etc., earn 2.50 lire per hour, or 20 lire per day. With the 15% increase, they will reach 23 lire.

“Since the increase granted does not pertain to the individual work skills of the worker but was approved due to the higher cost of living, it is said that the family burden of a skilled worker is the same as that of a laborer, unskilled worker, etc. - Therefore, it was hoped that the Central Corporate Committee would either adopt a sort of proportional scale or establish a fixed daily increase for all categories, precisely in light of the exceptional circumstances under which the approved increases are being implemented. In short, to avoid creating further inequalities, which in a normal regime are justified by individual work skills but which, in this specific case, relate solely to the cost of living” (ibid., b. 207).

Comprehensive studies on the working class during these years (and throughout the entire Fascist period) are still lacking. Useful, though fragmentary and often superficial, insights are provided by the very recent series of essays collected in the twentieth volume (1979–80) of the “Annali” of the G. G. Feltrinelli Foundation.

61 A typical example is found in a report from Trieste dated June 12, 1939: “At the time, of course, the entire working class had welcomed with great satisfaction the announcement of the improvements that would be made to the various benefits provided for the different branches of insurance.

“But these improvements—which at the time were believed to have been introduced both because the larger number of policyholders allowed for a better distribution of the premiums they paid and because the capital accumulated over the long term seemed sufficient to guarantee higher payouts—have now been followed by the necessary adjustments to the premium schedules. This [nc] has somewhat dampened the enthusiasm of the past.

“Among the working-class and white-collar workers, this has become a topic of debate, which remains ongoing. It is said that social security deductions are currently quite substantial and amount to a significant reduction in wages, especially for those who cannot rely on overtime or piecework. It is said

that people are currently paying nearly double what they did before these changes were introduced and that almost the entire recent wage increase has been absorbed by the new, higher social security contributions.

“There are also those who strike a discordant note, citing the state’s new and pressing need to secure the necessary funds by any means to meet the urgent and major needs of the moment” (ibid., b. 217).

62 Some Fascist federations, such as the one in Turin, had already pointed out as early as the beginning of 1938 that it would be advisable not to levy taxes or at least to suspend tax assessments for the supplementary tax (ACS, PNF, Political Situation of the Provinces, “Turin,” “Memorandum for H.E. Starace,” undated but from January 1938). On March 17, 1939, the General Directorate of Direct Taxes of the Ministry of Finance sent instructions to regional tax inspectorates not to include the new wage adjustments for the purposes of applying the tax on movable wealth, ACS, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Cabinet, Records, file no. 18-5/1454.

labor and the presence of the union in the factory. Viewing the entire issue from a broader political perspective, it is certainly not without significance that, while through all of 1938 the reports of informants and the police were unanimous in warning against considering the working class to be sympathetic to the regime (and not infrequently in highly alarmed tones), by 1939, such remarks became less frequent and less dramatic, and there was no shortage of optimistic—or at least non-alarmist—comments. The following observation, taken from a report from Milan dated April 16, 1940, at the height of “non-belligerence”[63], is significant:

The working class is perhaps the most calm. It is the group least concerned with politics. Even the white-collar class is calm today. Those who are constantly discontented are largely homeowners and landowners, merchants, and even many industrialists.

We have described this observation as significant, referring above all to what, until not long before, had been the prevailing view of the overwhelming majority of informants and police officials, in order to highlight the contrast. However, it would be a mistake to take it literally, generalize it, or base an overall assessment of the working-class masses’ attitude toward the regime on it and on other similar remarks found in other reports. Other reports, from 1939 and 1940, could—if taken just as literally—justify the claim that the workers’ “calm” was instead the result of resignation, opportunism, or even such deep-seated hatred of fascism that they went so far as to hope for a war just to free themselves from their “current slavery” and to await it by displaying “a normal, calm, and submissive demeanor.” M. That said, it must also be noted that toward the end of the 1930s, as economic hardship subsided—at least in part— something in the workers’ attitude toward the regime undoubtedly began to change, softening—even amid the general fear of war and hostility toward the alliance with Germany (which, however, was less intense among workers than among the middle classes and even the peasantry, especially among the younger workers)—some of the more strictly political points of contention. Although this development could also be interpreted as opportunism, it is not without significance that in December 1939—when membership in the PNF was reopened to former combatants—quite a few workers took advantage of the opportunity to join the party.[65] Less open to interpretation, however, is another event that occurred during the same period: the sympathy with which even the workers viewed Finland after it was attacked by the USSR.[66] Nor should this come as a surprise when one considers the years that Fascism had been in power, the natural transformation of the working class’s composition—brought about by the replacement of older members with young people who very often had known no reality other than the fascist one, had been shaped by its atmosphere and its “school,” and not infrequently came from the countryside—as well as the influence of the environment and the gradual

disappearance of alternative voices and active anti-fascist groups capable of proposing credible forms of struggle worth taking risks for. Furthermore, as Eugenio Colorni and Ruggiero Grieco realistically pointed out in the anti-fascist press toward the end of 1936, Fascism had never made the defense of capitalism its banner, nor had it ever bestowed the halo of national sanctity upon the financial magnates. Not only that: it proclaimed its interest in the working classes and posed as their defender,[67] and the fascist workers (by then quite numerous) with whom they were in contact were, "in the vast majority, honest workers who believed that Fascism would one day put an end to the capitalists, defended their own interests and those of their fellow workers, and were often at the forefront of workers' struggles"[68]. And all this without considering what was happening in the unions, particularly those in industry.

65 A report from Rome dated December 11, 1939, states: "Another matter that is being discussed very favorably among the workers is the decision to admit all former combatants into the Party, and I can assure you—as I have heard—that the largest contingent will come precisely from the workers who are pleased with this great decision by the Duce, which will give many the opportunity and the honor of wearing the black shirt.

"I also inform you that several former subversives whom I know to be 'sleeping agents' are likewise pleased with this measure and will, as former combatants, apply to join the Party, because they say that, despite their silence, they have always been admirers of Mussolini—and they say so publicly—and that the Duce deserves the applause of all citizens of good faith because he has truly proven himself to be a man of phenomenal goodness and steadfastness." (ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Political Police Division, Category 1, File 217).

66 A report from Sesto San Giovanni dated December 9, 1939, states: "The events unfolding in Finland have made a painful impression on the local population and among the working class itself; while sympathies for the small, attacked nation are not concealed, harsh comments against such an unjust and brutally aggressive action are not spared.

"Among the working class, this singular and instructive about-face by those who have always preached against imperialism—and who now do not hesitate to expose their true aims and bring destruction and misery upon a harmless and highly civilized people—is observed not without irony.

"The reports confirming the heroic resistance put up by the Finns and the difficulties the Russians are encountering, as well as the details the newspapers publish about the ongoing war, are a source of satisfaction that openly indicates how general sympathies lie with the Finnish people" (ibid.).

In the first volume of this work,[69] we discussed the revival of internal life and activity that took place in the first half of the 1930s within the fascist trade unions, and the consequences this had both from an organizational standpoint and in terms of the establishment of a certain level of trust in them on the part of workers, especially younger ones. As far as the workers themselves were concerned, however, this phenomenon had remained, on the whole, fairly limited up until the Ethiopian War, even though it had yielded some results that would prove to be quite significant in the long run—first and foremost, that of providing the rank-and-file and mid-level union leadership with a fair number of activists and leaders coming directly from the working class who, therefore, understood the reality of the working class better than the vast majority of other leaders, were generally attuned to its problems, and enjoyed far greater trust than others. With the end of the Ethiopian War, this process began to intensify.

Within the unions—and especially within the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers (whereas in

the Confederation of Agricultural Workers, ties and collusion with landowners remained much stronger, which limited the Confederation's internal renewal)—there were growing tendencies toward more genuinely union-based action, aspirations for a more active and direct social and political role, and the determination to oppose those who sought to hollow out the union to the sole benefit of the guilds and, ultimately, to suppress it or reduce it to something akin to the Nazi unions[70], grew stronger and bolder. Social expectations—suppressed for years and now heightened by the victory in Africa—breathed new life into the old revolutionary trade unionists (or "Corridoniani," as they liked to call themselves), the Malusardis, the De Ambris, the Cianettis, the Capoferris, and—among the younger generation—the Fontanellis and the Venturis, who deep down had never resigned themselves to Rossoni's defeat and disavowal; and they caused a number of young Fascists, weary of the inconclusive verbal battles over corporatism and the "new Fascist social order," to look at the unions with renewed interest. In this new climate—which was not limited to the unions but also extended to other organizations active in the world of labor,[71] though it found its most evident and significant expression in the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers— the unions' actions—especially after Mussolini gave the "green light" by accepting their demands for wage increases in the summer of 1930—soon became more decisive, finding significant resonance and often serving as a sounding board in the youth press and, through it, in many of the major Fascist publications as well. Certainly, the difficulties were not few. Despite the incipient recovery of previous years and the growing commitment of a portion of its leadership,[72] the Fascist union could certainly not easily rid itself (in fact, it never completely rid itself) of its original flaws and the limitations inherent in the particular balance of power within the

70 The first defense of the fascist trade union model against attempts to import the Nazi model into Italy was likely that of L. Begnotti, *Evoluzione corporativa* (Rome, 1934)—a work also notable for its assertion that trade unions were indispensable even under a corporatist regime and for its defense of their political functions. For subsequent developments in the trade union leadership's stance on this matter, the report that T. Cianetti drafted upon his return from a 1937 trip to Germany—published in M. Simonetti, *Stato, Partito e Sindacato in Italia e in Germania attraverso una relazione del 1937 a Mussolini sul "Fronte tedesco del lavoro"* (DAF), in *Ricerche storiche* (Piombino), January–April 1979, pp. 180 ff.

71 A typical product of this climate was the memorandum (in print) that the National Fascist Cooperative Authority sent to the members of the commission to which the Grand Council had entrusted the task of preparing the transformation of the Chamber of Deputies into the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations. In it, following an ambiguous reference to the "proprietary guild" that could also be interpreted positively, one finds passages of this kind (pp. 7–8) that reveal new attitudes and sentiments: "While the idea of a proprietary guild that owns and operates enterprises has been floated, according to models and theories that have remained within the broad realm of brilliant polemical disquisitions, what has remained concrete is the widespread flourishing of industrial and commercial initiatives, which have taken the form of mandatory consortia, companies, institutions, and national bodies that—though perhaps created to resolve momentary emergency situations—have since become permanently embedded in the country's economic activity, making the weight of their existence clearly felt.

"Unfortunately, it has become apparent that these organizations were, for the most part, or very quickly became, the embodiment of particular sectoral interests and, at times, of clearly identifiable groups within the same sector. Consortia among industrialists—from iron to cement, from metals to fertilizers, from oilseeds to fodder, from bricks to glass, from paper to ceramics, from wool to cotton, etc., are the broadest and most concrete manifestation of such clusters of interests, which often take on truly

monopolistic structures and create discord among members of the same category or among related categories, thereby giving rise to genuine inequalities to the detriment of others.

“There are countless complaints from small and medium-sized industrialists and from the most enterprising artisans (who constitute the healthiest segment of national industry) regarding the impositions and absolute arbitrariness with which these consortia or institutions operate for the benefit of a few large industrialists. A typical example—and a specific citation is unnecessary—is the role played by such organizations in setting quotas, distributing raw materials, establishing export quotas, and fixing domestic prices.

“The situation that has arisen in the commercial sector is not very different, especially following the establishment of balanced trade and currency controls. In this sector, only the energetic and prudent action of the Party’s Price Committee and the Undersecretariat for Trade and Currency has prevented the spread of exploitative practices in domestic commerce, especially because the safety valve of supplies through consumer cooperatives has been kept open. Nevertheless, while there have been honest Italian merchants, mindful of their responsibilities, who have accepted the new conditions with perfect discipline and have even suffered obvious disadvantages as a result, there have been others who, taking advantage of their particular position, have been able to dispose of quotas of imported goods as they pleased, profiting not from the fair and normal exchange of products, but from the mere possession of import permits. Within the trade associations themselves, due to the strong and evident conflict between wholesalers and retailers, there was a sense of urgency to partially remedy this state of affairs by creating trade unions; however, these unions limited themselves to safeguarding the interests of the largest players, leaving many of the major inequalities unchanged and thereby exacerbating certain already difficult situations.” (ACS, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Cabinet, Proceedings (1937–39), file 1-5-1/4387).

72 Toward the end of 1938, the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers had over 45,000 officials (of whom only 114 were salaried): 20 National Federation secretaries, 94 Provincial Union secretaries, 34 National Union secretaries, 445 regional delegates, 6,449 municipal delegates, 3,468 secretaries of interprovincial and provincial unions, 5,336 secretaries of municipal unions, and 34,685 members of executive committees, trustees, and company correspondents. As for the staff employed by the Confederation, it totaled 2,358, with 514 working at headquarters and the rest in the field. In terms of party seniority, this staff was divided as follows:

on which the regime was based: bureaucracy, corruption, psychological inferiority vis-à-vis employers, political distrust and suspicion toward workers, dependence on political power, and technical incompetence were widespread at virtually all levels. Nor should one underestimate the pressure exerted on many unionists by the endless possibilities that employers had—both locally and nationally—to use the police and party authorities to target those who caused them too much trouble.[73] Nevertheless, in 1937 and even more so during the following three years (roughly until the entry into the war, which, in the name of the “higher interests of the fatherland,” marked the end of Fascist trade unionism as a force capable of at least partially defending workers), the results achieved were far from insignificant, both in the realm of national and company-level collective bargaining[74] and its effective enforcement, as well as in the regulation of piecework and work rhythms, the defense of workers against employer abuse (especially unjustified dismissals, to prevent changes in job classification, or due to “union unrest”), individual labor disputes, the monitoring of working conditions, mutual aid and employment placement, apprenticeships, and even more so, social assistance.[75] So much so that Cianetti, in his aforementioned *Un fascista a Castèlvecchio*, wrote:

Men	Women	Total
1919	68 a	-	68
1920	170	—	170
1921	276	3	281
1922	220	4	224
1923	102	6	108
1924	50	3	53
1925	72	9	81
1926	113	13	126
1927	76	22	98
1928	70	22	92
1929	39	22	61
1930	40	30	70
1931	44	34	78
1932	175	38	213
1933	120	63	183
1934	48	119	167
1935	32	148	180
1936	23	45	68
1937	12	34	46
1938	8	25	33
Others			158

a Of which 5 were from San Sepolcro. b For which precise data were lacking.
In 1937, the Confederation’s activities consisted of 10,607 meetings of provincial directors,

1,720 plenary meetings of executives, and 11,780 sector-specific assemblies.

74 During the wage increases of March 1940, the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers secured a 15 percent raise for third-category employees (the largest group) and an 8 percent raise for workers, ACS, Ministry of the Interior, Dir. Gen. PS, Div. Political Police, Cat. 1, Box 207, P. Capoferri to A. Bocchini, March 23, 1940. Internal Affairs, General Directorate of Public Security, Political Police Division, Category 1, File 207, P. Capoferri to A. Bocchini, March 23, 1940.

In the social sector, there was such fervor and such a high level of innovative ferment had been reached that in 1938, at a congress of the Confederation of Industrial Workers, the 1926 trade union law and the regulatory provisions of the Charter of Labor itself were declared obsolete by the spirit of the times.

The most significant achievements were, in 1937, the acquisition of the right to participate with their own representatives in setting piecework rates and, in October 1939, the recognition and official reinstatement of factory trustees. Initially limited to the industrial sector, then extended to the credit and insurance sectors and to commerce, this was certainly the most important development politically, both because it fulfilled one of the workers’ most fervent aspirations and because, for Fascist trade unionism, it amounted to a genuine victory over the employers who, ten years earlier, had forced the abolition of the factory trustees. Also in 1939, two other very important events took place: the enactment, in April, of new legislation regarding worker assistance, and, in October, the transfer of the

Dopolavoro from the jurisdiction of the National Fascist Party (PNF) to that of the trade unions. The first legislation provided for an increase in unemployment benefits (from 1.25–3.75 lire to 2,507 lire per day, plus a progressive supplement for children under the age of fifteen), improvements to disability and old-age pensions (lowering the age limit for the latter from 65 to 64 years, with a future reduction to 60 for men and 60 and 55 for women) and their transferability to survivors, as well as family allowances, insurance, and marriage and childbirth bonuses; and, most importantly, the extension of social insurance to a whole range of categories of workers who had previously been excluded from it.[76] Despite the undoubted benefits they brought and despite the fact that the greatest burdens fell on employers, the new legislation—as we have mentioned—sparked considerable discontent among workers (which, moreover, according to the president of the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers, T. Cianetti, wrote to Mussolini, had been partly and skillfully orchestrated by "many industrialists" and certain politicians who had not "been able to set aside their position as employers")—due to the amount of the contribution rates imposed on them, which were considered too high. To better understand the spirit and challenges of Fascist trade unionism during these years, the stance taken by the union leadership on this issue is significant. The scope—and thus the burden—of the reform (personally authorized by Mussolini, who, urged primarily by the workers' confederations, outlined its basic principles in a letter dated November 24, 1938, to the president of the INPS) was the subject of heated discussions among the confederations of employers and workers, the Ministry of Corporations, and the INPS. Employers, led by those in industry, immediately declared that the anticipated burden was unsustainable for them and maintained this stance even after a revision of the proposal reduced it. At this point, faced with a choice between a solution more favorable to workers—but in which the costs would be shared between employers and employees—and one less favorable to workers—but in which the costs would not fall on them— the union leadership opted for the former with this somewhat "pedagogical"—but above all political—argument, which Cianetti repeated to Mussolini (who, certainly not by chance, a few weeks later transferred him from the presidency of the Confederation of Industrial Workers to the Undersecretariat of Corporations with the task of overseeing social security77)

75 Significant for the mutual aid system is the trend in the ratio between the number of reported cases of illness (a) and the number of cases of illness compensated (b):

a B

1934 424,031 312,181 1935 492,010 425,201 1936 560,931 491,424 1937 680,003 631,012

76 On the new legislation, see B. Biagi, *Fascist Reform of Social Security*, Rome 1939; INFPS, *Conference of Social Security Executives* (Forti, July 25, 1939–XVII), Rome 1939;

INPS, The First Seventy Years of the INPS Through Social Security Legislation, Rome 1970, pp. 265 ff.; as well as ACS, Private Secretariat of the DUEE, Regular Correspondence (1922–43), file no. 509562, "National Institute of Social Security." '

77 A confidential report from Genoa dated July 31, 1939, states: "The news of Cianetti's appointment as Undersecretary of Social Security was received with great satisfaction in all labor union circles, where there was a felt need for a figure who enjoyed a certain authority among the working masses to head all social security services.

"It is well known that the recent increases in social security contributions have caused considerable

discontent among the working masses, who, while appreciating the improvements made in all areas of social security, have seen their wages decrease. The working masses assert that the new social security contributions have nullified the recent wage increase and have therefore created a sense of financial strain in their household budgets. The increase in contributions has been deemed too steep, especially at this time, when the cost of living has risen significantly, while earnings, rather than increasing, have decreased. This explains all the complaints, criticisms, and grumbling that have been voiced—and continue to be voiced—by workers and employees.

“ The labor unions have not been very active in carrying out a propaganda campaign among the masses to convince them to calmly accept the increase in social security contributions. There has been a lack of effective persuasion to help them better appreciate the benefits that the Regime has established for workers. The labor unions have limited themselves to distributing leaflets in the workshops and in the

even after the new legislation was enacted, in response to the criticism leveled against it as soon as it became clear that it had dissatisfied not only employers—which was predictable and anticipated—but also a large portion of workers.78

Was it appropriate to place the entire burden of the reform on employers?

This question was on everyone’s mind when you ordered Comrade Biagi to take action.

The need for worker participation became immediately apparent for the following main reasons:

a) If social security fulfills, in addition to its specific function, an educational role as well, it must necessarily be sustained by the workers themselves, who, only through the sacrifice of a contribution, will have a stake in its development.

b) A reform of social insurance cannot take place on a short-term basis: radical reforms may occur every twenty years. The reform of the seventeenth year, awaited and called for by the working masses, had to be radical; that is, it had to guarantee that decisive step forward in social legislation that you rightly mandated. And since the costs of such a reform could not help but be substantial—had workers’ participation not been permitted—employers’ contributions would have had to be limited to much more modest percentages than those adopted overall.

The reform would have been extremely modest, while the workers would have had to express more gratitude than necessary for the employers’ generosity.

c) The workers’ failure to share in the costs of the reform would have been exploited politically by the employers. There was no secret—especially within the Confederation of Industrialists—of the intention to obtain

pamphlets that clearly explain the new improvements made to pensions, unemployment benefits, marriage and childbirth bonuses (Appendices No. 2), etc., but this form of propaganda fell flat; indeed, workers and employees grumbled even more, saying that these were fine ideas but that no one was able to bear new burdens.

“Workers are always reluctant to believe in future benefits and focus on immediate effects. In this case, they looked at the reduction in their wages and grumbled—and continue to grumble...

“After all, even in the past, workers had the same mindset as they do today. I recall that in 1920, various categories of workers went on strike because they did not want to be required to pay social insurance premiums… whereas later, as the years went by and some began to receive even a minimal pension, social security was hailed as a great achievement.

“Today, it is necessary to carry out an entirely new campaign of propaganda among the working masses —especially among office workers—to restore their peace of mind and help them accept with greater understanding and enthusiasm the sacrifice of increased social security contributions, which ensure them so many benefits.

“This work of persuasion and propaganda can be carried out by His Excellency Cianetti, who enjoys great trust and authority among the working masses.

“In various factories, it has been reported that at the Forlì conference, chaired by His Excellency Lantini, several directors of the Social Security Institute’s regional offices stated that the working masses have shown themselves to understand the necessity of social security reform—that is, the increase in contribution rates. In their comments, the workers reiterated what they had been saying in recent days, namely, that under current circumstances they feel very uncomfortable having to pay onerous contributions for social security and welfare—a discomfort stemming from the rising cost of living and low wages.

“The workers also said that leaders in general—whether union leaders, politicians, etc.—are eager to claim that everything is fine, and in this way they deceive the Duce...” (ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Political Police Division, Category 1, File 217).

reassurances and guarantees to workers’ organizations with the aim of postponing the periodic revisions of employment contracts and wage scales.

I believe I know—having heard it from the person concerned himself—that Count Volpi also expressed these intentions before you, Duce. And how could one have failed to offer some assurances to the employers who were shouldering the entire burden of the reform?

The transfer of the OND to the unions, however, met with unanimous approval among workers (but not among industrialists). A seemingly innocuous measure, but one that was in fact deeply felt by the workers and which—but we will return to this later—was in line with the thinking of the most sensitive and dynamic segment of the union leadership, which saw it as a significant step toward greater autonomy and initiative for their organizations and, therefore, an increase in their political clout.[79]

In light of what we have said, it is not difficult to understand the changes that took place during these years in the attitudes of large segments of the working class, especially among younger workers.

In 1936, workers’ attitudes toward the Fascist unions were still highly varied, depending on local circumstances, the extent to which socialist traditions had survived, and the degree of influence demonstrated by the unions themselves. As a December report noted, for example[80]:

In the working-class areas of greater Genoa, the mood among the working masses is not particularly reassuring.

Everywhere there is a trend against union action, which workers believe is inadequate for the needs of the moment; against the countless violations of labor laws and contracts committed by industries; against the Party's support, which is not considered sufficient; and so on.

The masses' attention is constantly focused on events in Spain. There is a great deal of talk about it, and it is said that victory will go to the Red Militias. Some make no secret of the fact that the victory of the Red Militias will trigger "something" in various other nations as well, including Italy.

In other areas, especially where the union was more active and had worked to protect workers in some way, there were those who viewed it differently, participated in its activities (especially welfare and social security initiatives[81]), and would have liked these efforts to be expanded beyond merely immediate economic and mutual aid issues[82]. In companies where, in July 1936, there had been labor unrest during the first across-the-board wage increase and the renewal of national collective bargaining agreements—and where factory representatives (who at that time were not yet officially recognized or contractually protected) had been at the forefront—workers' affinity for the union was even greater[83].

79 The effort made by the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers to develop its own cultural and union groups should be viewed in the same light (in 1937, there were 86 groups and 150 sections in operation, with over 900 instructors, attended by over 12,000 workers and rank-and-file union officials) that stood in contrast to the factory schools established by the major companies and, in a certain sense, also to the state-run vocational schools. See, for further details, T. M. Mazzatosta, *Il regime fascista tra educazione e propaganda*, op. cit., pp. 125 ff.

In 1937, 1938, 1939, and again in 1940, in the face of the growing and increasingly concrete trade union initiative and the resulting improvement in wages and social benefits (and, at least for some groups of older workers, probably also as a result of the fading of hopes raised by the events in Spain and their rapid descent toward an outcome that seemed to confirm the invincibility of fascism), this attitude of the working masses underwent significant changes. The labor union gradually gained more credibility, and in its wake, fascism also made significant inroads among workers—particularly among young workers—even though—let this be clear—the "consent" it earned was essentially passive and — except for cases that are impossible to quantify but were very limited — was very largely conditioned by the environment and by the union's ability to improve, albeit slowly, their living and working conditions and to provide some outlet for their still-vivid anti-capitalist demands.[84] Eugenio Curiel, who knew the Italian situation well from the inside and who strove to persuade the anti-fascist parties to become aware of this new reality and to adapt their actions to it, taking full advantage of all its possibilities, wrote some very precise observations for the anti-fascist press between late 1938 and early >1939. Regarding young people, he wrote85:

82 In an informational report from Turin dated September 1936, the following interesting observations can be found—clearly the result of various influences, yet indicative of a reality in flux: "Finally, some workers complain about the lack of their own newspaper or publication that, in addition to serving as a means of trade union outreach, could address the occupational and professional issues that concern them, while also serving to illustrate the regime's initiatives, measures, and policies toward the working class. It is noted that the need for broader union propaganda would also be appropriate, not least for the very spirit of the masses, who, on the whole, have little contact with union organizations—contact limited mostly to the handling of immediate economic and specific issues—while, based on the comments gathered, many of them would like to follow more directly all the issues that directly or indirectly affect their category and constitute the worker's life in the workplace and in their daily

activities. Similar outreach could also be carried out among workers in neighborhood groups, which, as they themselves note, are underattended due to a lack of familiarity with the environment. In this regard, it should be added, conferences, meetings, or other events could contribute to greater worker attendance at the union headquarters, with obvious benefits for a better understanding of political and union matters" (ACS, PNF, Political Situation of the Provinces, "Turin").

84 Typical in this regard is the lack of interest and, very often, the skepticism and distrust that the vast majority of workers—including young people—showed toward all those aspects of the regime's domestic policy that did not in some way concern their own circumstances. Significant is what a police informant from Turin reported on May 16, 1938, regarding the reactions sparked by the Grand Council's decision to establish the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations. Regarding the workers' reactions, he wrote: "In this regard, I have spoken with several people and found that very few have a clear idea of what this Chamber of Fasci and Corporations will be; generally, no one is talking about it, and the few who do mention it say:

the regime claims to want social justice; it claims that it is time to bridge the gaps and to establish the 'century of the power of labor.' Convinced by these arguments, young people, dressed in black shirts, intervene in union assemblies, demanding redress against the arbitrariness of the employers.

The older generation—who had known freedom and true trade unionism, had witnessed its violent dismantling at the hands of the fascists, and who did not "speak the fascist language" like the young people—were more cautious and wary, but also disheartened and resigned. For them, too, however, the fascist union, in that situation, was still the only tool through which—despite all its limitations, its demagoguery, its internal contradictions, its lack of true autonomy, and its use by the regime as a tool to influence those masses that the PNF could reach only marginally—one could mount a defense, wage a class struggle, and that, for better or worse, it provided some protection. As Curiel83 further wrote, the function of the fascist union is irreplaceable, and the laid-off worker goes to the fascist union to be represented—albeit weakly—in the settlement of severance pay; goes to the employment office (now definitively under union control) to register on the lists; goes to the union for social insurance; for mutual aid, and goes to the union to protest against the most flagrant violations of collective bargaining agreements. Often, too, he finds himself gathered at industry-specific assemblies and has the opportunity to discuss the most pressing demands with his fellow workers and lower-level officials. Ultimately, we can conclude that the few expressions of an economic class struggle by the Italian industrial proletariat take place within the fascist trade union milieu... The memory of the days of trade union freedom certainly persists among the older workers, but it no longer prevents them from sometimes actively participating in fascist trade union life. The worker who goes to the union often knows—especially if he is older—just how limited his options are; he knows that Cianetti is the crass embodiment of the will of big capital, but by now he is often bound by ties of trust in the honesty and good faith of some lower- and mid-level officials, who have at times served as the rallying point for a campaign of workers' demands.

"For us workers, things will not change.

"With the number of representatives having increased, we will certainly have to expect a rise in union dues.

"We will never be free to elect our own candidate.

"It is unlikely that the representative of a given category will be able to truly defend the interests of that

category."

"As in other cases, only a few of those elected will have the necessary expertise and knowledge of the group they will represent.

"To put it briefly and for the time being, the working class places very little trust or hope in this change; however, it agrees that if this Chamber of Fasci and Corporations is elected without the usual biases and with members who thoroughly understand the interests they will be called upon to represent and defend, it can do much for the individual and national economy as a whole, improving and remedying many shortcomings" (ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Political Police Division, Category 1, File 139).

"Ibid., I, pp. 236 ff.

Based on what we have been saying regarding the economic reality and its repercussions on the country's mood toward the regime, it seems we can conclude that—contrary to what is very often claimed—toward the end of the 1930s, while discontent and concerns were widespread across all social classes and circles, among the working class they were less pronounced or, in any case, politically less concerning for the regime and - again, from the perspective of their political implications for the regime - on the whole, on the decline, whereas in other sectors of Italian society—including those in which Fascism had until then enjoyed its most solid base—they were on the rise.

Among the consequences of this new phase in trade union life and the support it garnered among broad sectors of the working class, the most significant for the purposes of our discussion are those that occurred at the level of the trade union confederations—and, as usual, primarily within the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers—and, even more so, at the level of the regime and its complex structure.

At the confederation level—as we have already noted—the years between mid-1936 and mid-1940 were characterized by: a) an expansion and transformation of the rank-and-file and mid-level leadership, largely comprising new and young members who were more closely tied to the workers (who very often elected them directly) and more attuned to their problems, to their mindset and class spirit, and who inevitably influenced to some extent the other rank-and-file and mid-level cadres as well—and, albeit to a much lesser degree, the leadership too (or, if they did not influence it, they forced it not to fall too far behind them and the rank and file); £) a gradual reawakening or radicalization of the positions held by a large portion of the leadership trained in revolutionary syndicalism, anarcho-syndicalism, and socialism; c) an increase in the presence and influence of the younger generation of fascists, often eager only to settle down and advance their careers, but also frequently seeking to bring their own "revolutionary" and "social" interpretation of fascism into the union.[87] Combined and interacting with one another, these three factors created a mixture—certainly not explosive, but —compared to what had until then been the policy of the fascist unions and the reality of the regime—undoubtedly sufficient to stir up turmoil and deeply divide this reality, and to lead to the emergence within the leadership of the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers of certain tendencies that are difficult not to consider more political than union-based. An examination of the press, trade union publications, and the statements of leading Fascist trade unionists themselves allows us to identify the most significant of these tendencies. The first and most evident was an anti-capitalism—often rhetorical and empty of substance, but often sincere as well—which, though fairly restrained and

concealed at first, erupted with increasing clarity and even aggression as soon as it could use the anti-bourgeois polemic as a sort of shield. However, while the latter—as we have seen—generally focused primarily on the bourgeois "mentality" and "spirit," the stance of many trade unionists went further and, under the pretext of aiming for the full realization of corporatism and the "overcoming of capitalism as the unchallenged and dangerous manipulator of the economy," they argued for the need "to deprive private enterprise—and capitalism in particular—of the freedom to operate in conflict with the interests of the community" and—on this basis—attacked Confindustria on a series of issues that, very often, were not labor-related but political (the monopolistic policies of large conglomerates, "consortium mania," the tendency "to almost always express an unfavorable opinion regarding the approval of applications for new facilities or expansions, whether large or small, giving the impression of seeing in every application a potential harm to its members," as if seeking to "condemn dynamism in favor of stagnation," the policy of price controls and labor shortages, etc.), it championed technicians over corporate management and asserted the union's right to refuse "to recognize the identity of the interests of a group of capitalists and bankers with those of the people" and to advocate for a "leveling of wealth" and the elimination not of capital as private property, but of capital as the capitalist system, "as an instrument of absolute control over the country's economy, in conflict with the general interests of the nation"[88]. A second, equally vibrant trend was the advocacy for expanding both the scope of authority and the autonomy of the union. Everything concerning workers was to fall under the union's jurisdiction: wages, working conditions, but also vocational training, social assistance, and cultural and political education. And, ultimately, the economy. As Luigi Fontanelli wrote on November 3, 1938, in *Il lavoro fascista*, commenting on the session of the Supreme Commission on Autarky held in the preceding weeks, " the workers' confederations had realized that the "social" sphere, strictly speaking, is not served solely by what might be called the "frontal assault" of the union's customary, traditional action, but also—and above all—by leading the Fascist union to operate in the realm of the fundamental problems of the national economy as the Party's most direct and reliable instrument.

In line with this trend, even outside the union there were those, such as S. Panunzio,[90] who went so far as to speak of an expansive role for the union in all aspects and in every sense of economic life, and of a transition from legal-professional unionism to economic-productive unionism and, finally, to "para-unionism"; that is, a trade union that "promotes, organizes, and controls para-union economic entities, which are collective economic entities: more specifically, industrial agreements; commercial companies; agricultural consortia; and production and worker cooperatives among workers." For the purposes of our discussion, however, other manifestations of this trend are far more interesting, and their political significance cannot be underestimated. We have already mentioned some of them: the competition—which essentially failed—with the Ministry of National Education over control of vocational schools, and the competition—which, on the other hand, concluded successfully—with the party over control of the Dopolavoro. Others can be discerned here and there as they surface in the course of individual statements, even by leading figures such as Pietro Capoferri, T. Cianetti's successor at the helm of the Fascist Confederation of Industrial Workers since September 1939." Among these, the most significant are those that bear witness to an underlying controversy both with the existing corporatist system—accused of excessive bureaucracy that slowed the examination and resolution of disputes, dragged procedures into "harmful labyrinths," and entailed disproportionate expenses—and with the National Fascist Party (PNF), accused in turn of "revolutionary fatalism" — that is, of focusing on formal discipline while remaining essentially indifferent and inadequate to the problems and mindset of the working masses, thereby interrupting or undermining their "admirable enthusiasm for the Duce, in whom they see the Man who has freed them from the speculations of political profiteers and set them on the path toward a more just standard of living"92. A third trend, which is not evident in the press or in published works but emerges from other sources, was, finally, the attempt to rebuild trade union unity among workers through a "re-blocking" of the confederations that

would restore (drawing on a vague remark made several years earlier by Mussolini to Rossoni, in which he characterized the “unblocking” as an “error”) the situation that existed prior to the “unblocking” at the end of 1928 93, with all the consequences that this would have entailed in terms of the union’s political clout and, within it, that of the most active and progressive federation—that of industrial workers. Finally, to understand the prospects toward which the most dynamic segment of the union leadership was moving, it is not without significance (even though the matter came to nothing) that in 1938 Cianetti had presented Mussolini with a study on worker share ownership and profit-sharing.

The sounding board for this new phase of union life was the youth press—primarily that of the GUF[94] —and the provincial Fascist press[95], where the presence of young people was also generally conspicuous. The mainstream news media, on the other hand, was quite cautious, not at all receptive, and at times more or less subtly critical. As for the major Fascist dailies and political and political-cultural magazines, their stance varied depending on the Fascist figures or groups behind them. With the exception of *Il Popolo d’Italia*, they too were, in the vast majority of cases, rather cautious and—upon closer reading—very often reveal, rather than genuine approval, concern, especially regarding the trade unionist and anti-capitalist “excesses” of young people. The stance of *Critica Fascista* is significant. In its pages during these years, there was much discussion of trade unions, the relationship between the union and the party, the union and the GUF, the Littoriali del Lavoro, the fascist training of young workers, etc., but essentially to support the argument that young people’s contribution to the discussion of certain issues and to a clearer understanding of them was desirable, and to highlight the fascist and “revolutionary” spirit of youth; On the other hand, there were few (with the most significant exceptions, perhaps, being certain “Stoccate” by B. Ricci) statements in favor of the underlying trends emerging within the trade unions or of the arguments put forward by those young Fascists who would have liked to see these trends explicitly adopted and advanced by the regime—and first and foremost by the party. Nor should this attitude come as a surprise. At its root, in fact, were often prejudices against the unions—whether Fascist or not, it mattered little—that had been deeply entrenched for years, concerns for the stability of the balances upon which the regime was founded, direct and indirect ties—sometimes far from transparent—with the economic, financial, industrial, and agricultural sectors; and—where these and similar motivations did not come into play—a widespread mindset that drove most Fascist leaders either to call for the strictest discipline from everyone or to entrench themselves in defense of a “peaceful existence” and, consequently, to fear or at least keep their distance from any new development that did not emanate directly from the “Duce” and therefore lacked his explicit approval, avoiding anything that might constitute a “danger”—all the more so if such developments could undermine or even jeopardize their personal positions of power. Nor, finally, should we forget that, while at the top of the Fascist hierarchy—which in practice controlled the vast majority of the most important daily and periodical press and sought to influence even the provincial and minor publications—the groups, clans were numerous, there were practically no “left-wing” men left, and the very few who might still have been considered as such were isolated figures who dared not give their opponents any pretext for being completely marginalized or, at the very least, denounced by some informant or fanatic as pro-Bolshevik.96 It is significant what a close friend and collaborator of Rossoni said in April 1937 to explain some veiled attacks on the former leader of the Fascist unions that had appeared in those weeks in a small local Fascist newspaper and which a diligent informant immediately reported to Palazzo Venezia:97

93 T. Cianetti was also in favor of the “re-blockade.” Among other things, he hinted at the possibility of achieving it during a conversation in early 1938 with E. Curiel: ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Political Police Division, Personal Information, p. 69, file. “Eugenio Curiel,” report on Curiel’s interrogations following his arrest, dated Milan, December 26, 1939, f. 9-

94 On the eve of Italy's entry into the war, the GUF's publications were as follows: 1. Bologna, "Architrave"; 2. Cagliari, "Sud-Est"; 3. Cremona, "Eccoci"; 4. Florence, "Rivoluzione"; 5. Forlì, "Via Consolare"; 6. Genoa, "Il Barco"; 7. Milan, "Libro e Moschetto"; 8. Modena, "La Marcia"; 9. Naples, "IX Maggio"; 10. Padua, "Il Bò"; 11. Palermo, "L'Appello"; 12. Parma, "Il Piccone"; 13. Pisa, "Il Campano"; 14. Rome, "Roma Fascista"; 15. Sassari, "Intervento"; 16. Turin, "Il Lambello"; 17. Trieste, "Decima Regio."

95 On the eve of Italy's entry into the war, the provincial periodicals of the PNF were as follows: 1. Agrigento, "A noi!"; 2. Alessandria, "Il Corriere di Alessandria"; 3. Ancona, "Sentinella Adriatica"; 4. Aosta, "La Provincia di Aosta"; 5. Apuania, "Il Popolo Apuano"; 6. Arezzo, "Giovinezza"; 7. Ascoli Piceno, "Eja!"; 8. Asti, "La Provincia di Asti"; 9. Avellino, "Il Corriere dell'Irpinia"; 10. Belluno, "La Provincia delle Dolomiti e del Piave"; 11. Benevento, "Il Sannio Fascista"; 12. Biella, "Il Popolo Biellese"; 13. Bologna, "L'Assalto"; 14. Bolzano, "Combattere"; 15. Brindisi, "Il Giornale di Brindisi"; 16. Cagliari, "Vincere"; 17. Caltanissetta, "Di Guardia"; 18. Catanzaro, "Audacia"; 19. Cattaro, "Le Bocche di Cattato"; 20. Chieti, "Nuovo Abruzzo"; 21. Cosenza, "Calabria Fascista"; 22. Crema, "La Voce di Crema"; 23. Cuneo, "La Provincia Grande"; 24. Ferrara, "XX Dicembre"; 25. Florence, "Il Bargello"; 26. Fiume, "Stile Fascista"; 27. Foggia, "Fiammata"; 28. Forlì, "Il Popolo di Romagna"; 29. Gorizia, "Voce Fascista"; 30. Grosseto, "La Maremma"; 31. L'Aquila, "Il Corriere di Abruzzo"; 32. La Spezia, "Il Popolo della Spezia"; 33. Lecce, "Vedetta Mediterranea"; 34. Lecco, "Il Popolo di Lecco"; 35. Livorno, "Sentinella Fascista"; 36. Lodi, "Il Popolo di Lodi"; 37. Lucca, "L'Artiglio"; 38. Macerata, "L'Azione Fascista"; 39. Milan, "Il Fascio"; 40. Monza, "Il Popolo di Monza"; 41. Novara, "L'Italia Giovane"; 42. Nuoro, "Nuoro Littoria"; 43. Parma, "La Fiamma"; 44. Pavia, "Il Popolo"; 45. Perugia, "L'Assalto"; 46. Pesaro, "L'Ora"; 47. Pescara, "L'Adriatico"; 48. Pisa, "L'Idea Fascista"; 49. Pistoia, "Il Ferruccio"; 50. Portoferraio, "Il Popolano"; 51. Ragusa, "La Vedetta Iblea"; 52. Ravenna, "Santa Milizia"; 53. Rovigo, "Il Polesine Fascista"; 54. Salerno, "Il Popolo Fascista"; 55. Sassari, "La Fionda"; 56. Sesto S. Giovanni, "Il Popolo di Sesto"; 57. Siena, "La Rivoluzione Fascista"; 58. Sondrio, "Il Popolo Valtellinese"; 59. Split, "Ti con nu, nu con ti"; 60. Taranto, "Il Rostro"; 61. Teramo, "Il Solco"; 62. Terni, "Acciaio"; 63. Turin, "Il Popolo delle Alpi"; 64. Trento, "Credere, Obbedire, Combattere"; 65. Treviso, "Il Piave"; 66. Venice, "Italia Nova"; 67. Vercelli, "La Provincia di Vercelli"; 68. Volterra, "Il Corazziere."

One must bear in mind that he is the only one within the Party, within the Government, and within the Grand Council to represent the faction that wants Fascism to move ever closer to the people and to conform to its programmatic principles—which, having been formulated by Mussolini, do not conflict with but rather aim to promote the advancement of the masses and the working classes. The Duce has never betrayed his origins, nor has he ever made a secret of his leanings. Momentary stances are a different matter; they can only be tactical measures intended to make the achievement of fundamental objectives more certain and more imminent. But all the men surrounding the Leader are either nationalists (and are therefore reactionaries who joined Fascism as a movement that would crush the aspirations of workers' demands) or have become careerists, political professionals, whose sole concern is to save their own personal positions... Those who speak of a left-wing movement within the Party do not understand the true state of affairs. No left-wing movement is possible in Italy at this time, because the men are lacking; as Rossoni himself rightly observes, all the leaders of the Party and the labor unions are conservatives by the very law of self-preservation. The greatest mistake, however, lies with those who wish to portray Rossoni as the voice of a movement opposed to the Leader—and, worse still, as one of the contenders for succession. Rossoni and his friends are Mussolinists, and we intend to

remain so.98

That said, it must also be noted that those newspapers and young people who took part in the labor union controversy—often imbuing it with a clearly anti-capitalist tone and not infrequently attacking and denouncing dysfunctions, misunderstandings, situations, and individuals —whether inefficient or corrupt union officials or dishonest companies and entrepreneurs who violated labor contracts, carried out reprisals against rank-and-file union leaders, etc.—did not encounter any real difficulties, and if they did run into any misfortune, it was due more to local squabbles and interventions than to actions from Rome. Even Curiel, who in 1937–38 wrote for *Il Bò* and in 1939 (after the introduction of anti-Jewish measures and immediately before his arrest as a communist) for *Corrente*[99] a substantial series of articles on labor union issues—which, having been conceived not from the perspective of a fascist, but rather from the perspective of an anti-fascist who operated in coordination with the central committees of GL, the PSI, and the PCdl, exploiting every possible avenue for denunciation and anti-fascist agitation available from an "entrist" position such as his—were certainly among the harshest, most well-documented, and most anti-capitalist pieces to appear in the fascist press during that period; yet even Curiel, as we were saying, faced no difficulties and, in fact, drew the attention of men like Cianetti and Bottai, who wanted to meet him and discuss trade union and political issues with him,0°. Not to mention Ruggero Zangrandi and some of his friends who, having distinguished themselves for their positions, were invited to write for various fascist newspapers and for "Popolo d'Italia" itself. From the pages of Mussolini's daily newspaper, Zangrandi was thus able, between August '38 and May '39, to launch a highly vigorous labor campaign, for which he also had contacts with leading labor figures such as Cianetti and the secretary of the Confederation of Commerce Workers, Riccardo Del Giudice (who even provided him with confidential documents to support his criticism of the union violations committed by UPIM and La Rinascente), and which caused a sensation both in Italy and abroad, as well as among the anti-fascist émigré community, especially after one of Zangrandi's articles was even attributed by many to Mussolini.[101]

96 Those with a leftist past and those who, even if only for academic reasons, were interested in issues related to communism and the USSR were particularly targeted by this kind of accusation. A typical example in this regard is a 1938 memo to the Ministry of Popular Culture titled "Left-Wing Fascism or Bolshevism?" In it, particular attention was focused on (citing for this purpose an article by P. Gentizon, "Moscou vu de Rome," in *Gazette de Lausanne*, July 26, 1937), not only Tommaso Napolitano and Gaspare Ambrosini (for their studies on the USSR) but also Corrado Alvaro, Berto Ricci, and Corrado Perris; it also reiterated the accusations against U. Spirito, B. Spampanato, A. Nasti, E. Weiss, A. Volpicelli, and F. Vassalli—accusations first leveled in 1933 by G. Cavallucci in his *Is Fascism on the Road to Moscow?* (ACS, Ministry of Popular Culture, b. 126, file "Center for Anti-Communist Studies," subfile "Napolitano").

98 According to Rossoni's friend, those militants from the left-wing parties who had not joined the fascist movement at the time were also responsible for this situation: "If you, instead of shutting yourselves off in your prejudices and your nihilism, had followed the Duce at the right time, things would certainly have turned out differently. Do you think, for example, what the Grand Council would be like if it included a dozen members who shared Rossoni's background and political mindset, rather than being a high assembly of nationalists? Then the Grand Council could truly become the supreme organ of the Mussolini revolution!"

100 The articles from these years are collected in the first volume of E. Curiel, *Scritti* (op. cit.); see, in particular, the most significant ones concerning the trade unions, pp. 61 ff., 103 ff., 107 ff., 115 ff.,

127 ff., 136 ff., 138 ff., 133 ff., 165 ff., 195 ff., and 253 ff.

For Curiel's political career and his arrest (on June 24, 1939, upon his return from a trip abroad), see G. Amendola's preface to the aforementioned volume, as well as the writings of G. Amendola himself in *Storia del Partito comunista italiano*, op. cit., pp. 360 ff., and especially M. Panzanfili, "The Political Activity of Eugenio Curiel (1932–1943)," in *Storia Contemporanea*, March–April 1979, pp. 233 ff.

At the end of 1934, Ugo D'Andrea, in reviewing Luigi Fontanelli's *Logica della Corporazione* and taking issue with his interpretation of corporatism, had asked himself, "If the entire substance of the revolution becomes economic and if there is no longer any distinction between the corporatist economy and the Bolshevik economy, one must indeed admit that the two postwar revolutions, Fascism and Bolshevism, are nothing but two sides of the same coin," and had warned that, if this were the case, it would "alarm those who have lived and fought for many years in a political context so different from the one described" '02. Now, just a few years later, the "unease" D'Andrea had spoken of had become a real and widespread reality, exacerbated, moreover, by the increasingly precarious international situation and by Mussolini's foreign, domestic, and economic policies.

It would be wrong to consider this "unease" and the psychological detachment from the regime that resulted for many as characteristic solely of the economic, financial, and business worlds. Even if the reasons for "unease" were partly different, psychological detachment from the regime was in fact also occurring in other sectors of the ruling class and the bourgeoisie in general. Fascism, and above all the National Fascist Party (PNF), had never enjoyed great prestige in these circles. In these circles, being a fascist very often meant being a Mussolini supporter, having faith in the "patriotism" and "common sense" of the "Duce," sharing his fundamental choices, and identifying with his "realism" and "modernity." As for the party, many—perhaps most—had always regarded it as a sort of superfluous appendage that was largely "by now" useless, often harmful, and overly intrusive, generally in the hands of people of no merit or standing, bureaucrats, profiteers, and "nasty characters," young men either chasing power and money or harboring strange ideas, who "ruined fascism" by claiming to impose on Italians what they already felt freely or a series of things for which there was actually no need and which, in any case, could have been done more discreetly, without "bothering" the "good citizens." This does not detract from the fact that the discredit to which Fascism and the party were subjected during these years was unprecedented. At the height of this discredit, ridicule, and outright hostility stood Starace, the symbol and chief architect of everything considered negative, grotesque, intrusive, rhetorical, and "non-Mussolinian" within the regime.[103] But—with rare exceptions (generally determined either by human sympathy or by the belief that one must arrive at state socialism, which I deplore; let us hope to reach it at least in this way, through a rational evolution)108.

103 Among the many anonymous letters sent to Mussolini denouncing Starace's "misdeeds" and demanding his removal from the party secretariat, we have chosen, by way of example, the following, which was prompted either by the reputation he had as a technocrat rather than a politician) - even the other party leaders were not spared from the criticism and general discredit that afflicted the entire Fascist hierarchy, from the highest-ranking figures to the lowest. And in particular, from accusations of profiteering, illegal activities, and fantastical enrichment. This accusation was sometimes justified but in many cases excessive; while vast and rapidly amassed fortunes were indeed accumulated during the Fascist period, it was not so much the politicians themselves (who, generally speaking, rather than truly enriching themselves, took advantage of the benefits associated with power to secure privileges and a standard of living that, given the origins of many of them and the reserved and modest habits of the majority of the pre-Fascist political class, seemed scandalous to many), these fortunes primarily involved the economic underworld that operated on the fringes of actual politics. Not to mention

another factor that, during these same years, contributed significantly to the psychological estrangement from the regime of not insignificant sectors of the traditional ruling class and the local elite (especially in the South[104]), who had joined it for a mixture of patriotic, class-based, and local power motivations and had served it “in good conscience” as long as they could, based on a practice that could be summed up in the formula “autonomy within obedience”: their realization that the regime’s progressive shift toward totalitarianism made it increasingly impossible to safeguard their “autonomy” within “obedience” and led to their gradual replacement) with new political personnel directly selected and often socially promoted by Fascism,05.

Moreover, it has the merit of clearly coming from a fascist: “Duce! Starace’s tenure is beginning to disgust the Italian people.

“But don’t you understand that this man is a coward, a nouveau riche, a frivolous man!!

“The leeway you’re giving him is so great that it seems to be overwhelming you.

“Are you beginning to realize that Starace has worn everyone out, and yet you still haven’t?...

“Duce, be forceful, as you were more so in the early days; change the guard often. — Don’t let the hierarchs become too entrenched, because once they’ve enriched themselves, they no longer think of the people.

“Casa Littorio should be the place where Italians turn for support and comfort. Yet Starace, with his policies, does nothing and only harms and disgusts the people.

“At Casa Littorio, they say they receive visitors once a week, but more often from the ushers than from the party officials. “What is the purpose of the grand and expensive Palazzo Littorio? Is it merely a comfortable headquarters, or a fortress for the great leader Starace?...” (ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence [1922–1943], W/R, file “Starace Achille,” subfile 1).

104 Various references to this phenomenon can be found in the proceedings of the conference *Mezzogiorno e fascismo* (The South and Fascism), Naples 1978, and in particular in the paper by M. Fatica, “Notes for a History of Naples in the Age of Fascism,” ibid., I, pp. 115 ff.

105 A peculiar yet significant aspect of this phenomenon is what took place within the aristocracy. Immediately after the rise of Fascism to power, many among them had viewed Fascism with sympathy and must have envisioned a sort of aristocratic revenge. The first nucleus of this trend was the Unione Cavalleresca and the *Rivista Araldica*, which had given rise to a fairly well-developed and widespread movement that, in 1930, even sent a memorandum to Mussolini proposing an official and legal framework for the nobility within the Fascist state. Other initiatives had taken different directions —neo-legitimist, absolutist, fascist-aristocratic, and so on. Within fascism, their points of reference had been *La nobiltà della

Thus, while it cannot be said with certainty that “restlessness” and psychological detachment were unique to the economic sphere, it is difficult to deny, however, that they were generally more pronounced there. Police records (prefects’ reports, confidential intelligence, wiretaps, etc.) are, in this regard, an extremely rich source of information and, when read without preconceptions, a consistent one. Under the guise of formal obedience and the most absolute loyalty, and while participating in all the “required” demonstrations, this sector—despite the advantages it derived from them—was, among

all the components of the regime and of Italian society, the one most deeply discontented and concerned about Mussolini's policies and, in particular, about the continuous loss of autonomy that these policies imposed on it with respect to both the state and the labor unions;106 not to mention the irritation and fears aroused within it by the anti-bourgeois polemics and the increasingly evident anti-capitalism among the younger generations of Fascists—which for some even brought to mind Scalarmi's "TAvanti!"107. Some hints of this can even be found in the trade press, for example in *L'organizzazione industriale* of April 20, 1939, in the report dedicated to the proceedings of the ASIA assembly, during which A. Pirelli complained of excessive government interference. Finally, one cannot underestimate the insights provided by memoirs such as Felice Guarneri's *Battaglie economiche* and Ettore Conti's *Dal taccuino di un borghese*. In the latter, the remarks accompanying the aforementioned passage on the financial oligarchy that dominated industry are particularly significant: a mixture of proud assertion of what he and his friends in the "oligarchy" had done for the Italian economy and protest against the attacks they were now facing:

Stirpe by S. M. Cutelli and, to some extent, *L'Impero*. See A. A. Monti, *Dottrina e posizioni del neolegittimismo*, Brescia 1923; and *Estrema destra*, Florence 1927; R. R. Petitto, *Legittimismo*, Milan-Rome 1923; and *Aristocrazia custode*, Brescia 1931; A. Pasini, *Impero unico*, Rome 1924; C. Pellizzari, *Funzioni moderne della nobiltà*, Rome 1930; S. M. Cutelli, *L'aristocrazia nella rivoluzione*, Rome 1930. Within the Fascist camp, all these tendencies had generally been viewed with impatience and hostility. Fascism—it was said—felt the need for an aristocracy, not one based on blood, but one of its own, "of the Lictor," that is, of men who had come from the experience "of war and revolution"; see C. Pellizzi, "On the Need for a Patriciate of the Fascist Regime," in *La nobiltà della stirpe*, December 3, 1931. For its part, the regime made use of "the aristocracy at the local level, appointing many nobles as podestà" (for Tuscany, see E. Ragionieri, "The Fascist Party [Notes for a Study]," in *Tuscany under the Fascist Regime*, op. cit., I, pp. 70 ff.), but it rejected all proposals for their political empowerment, such as making the Senate hereditary and reserved for the two aristocracies—that of blood and that of the "revolution."

By 1937–38, a large portion of the nobles who held administrative positions either resigned voluntarily or were replaced.

106 R. Sarti, *Fascism and Big Industry (1919–1940)*, Milan 1977, p. 121, has emphasized in this regard the official reintroduction of factory trustees in 1939, noting that this measure—along with the provision enacted two years earlier that had granted unions the right to participate in meetings where piecework rates were set—"was sufficient to give entrepreneurs the unpleasant impression that the regime was becoming too radical."

Executives of large corporations are routinely labeled plutocrats, exploiters of the people, and reactionaries who conspire against every form of progress and democracy: it is either unknown or unmentioned that the hundreds of millions in capital under scrutiny belong to tens of thousands of savers; people pretend to ignore that the largest shareholder is often the state, through the "IRI"; It is concealed that the profits allocated to "greedy capital" are a small fraction of what is distributed to labor: top executives are lumped together in envy and the resulting hatred with those who have dishonestly profited through speculation and other illicit means... However, this system makes it possible to coordinate various branches of production, facilitating technical progress and avoiding duplication; nor does it seem to me that the men who represent it have abused the influence they have attained. For my part, I believe that these concentrations are due more to the progress of production technology itself than to the audacity of those in power..., which concluded with a sentence that reveals the uncertainty about the future underlying these considerations:

At this point, before we proceed to draw the conclusions of our discussion, a question arises. As we have seen, Mussolini considered "possible factory closures, unemployment, etc. … infinitely lesser evils than the hemorrhage of our [currency] reserves" and regarded their social consequences as something about which "one need not worry excessively" since "all this can be overcome and, in any case, will be monitored and kept under control." The meaning of these statements—repeated twice in writing to Guarneri between mid-1937 and early 1938—leaves no room for doubt: Mussolini was prepared to sacrifice the living conditions of the working masses and—in order to carry out his autarkic policy—was willing, if necessary, to defy the discontent of at least a portion of those masses. Having chosen his path, he was, in short, determined to follow it through to the end. So far, we can say, everything is clear. And the same can be said for the other sectors of Italian society that bore, directly or indirectly, the burdens of the autarkic policy. What may, however, raise questions is why Mussolini did not take precautions against an excessive deterioration of the regime's relationship with the economic and business world (though, on closer inspection, the same applies to that segment of the bourgeoisie that had desired or accepted a certain form of fascism and was now beginning to fear that it was facing a different one) at least as far as labor policy was concerned, and, above all, why he did not prevent it from being attacked by a faction of fascism—a minority faction with as little political responsibility as one might wish, but nonetheless endorsed to some extent by the fact that it could express itself freely, even in the "Duce's" own newspaper —thereby allowing the image of a fascism in the process of transformation to take hold, precisely in the sense feared by D'Andrea a few years earlier, and consequently attributing a more radical political significance than they actually had to events (such as the recognition of factory trustees) that were already in themselves highly unwelcome to the economic and business world.

Given that, as we saw in the previous chapter, it is absolutely out of the question that Mussolini could have been considering a genuine "social turning point" during this period, the only political answer (to which, as we will see in the next chapter, an ideological one and a more personal, psychological one must be added) to the question we have posed seems to lie in the anti-bourgeois polemic, in the meaning Mussolini attributed to it within the broader context of the regime's "totalitarian turn," and in his already noted tendency—in order to foster its entrenchment—not to commit fully to preventing it from being shifted, by those fascists who advocated a genuine "social turn," from the realm of bourgeois "mentality" and "spirit" to the social realm. This response, moreover, raises a question of primary importance and brings our discussion to the heart of the matter: the nature of "consensus" during these years, the significance it held for the regime and for Mussolini in particular, and, therefore, the real meaning of the "crisis of consensus" that occurred during this period.

From what we have said so far, two things emerge clearly: 1) once the initial, very brief phase of hopes and expectations sparked by the victory in Ethiopia had passed, as early as the course of the year and especially during the following three and a half years, Mussolini's domestic and foreign economic policies caused considerable difficulties, discontent, and concerns throughout Italian society, albeit to varying degrees and with different patterns depending on its various segments; 2) As a result, the attitude of Italians toward the regime changed considerably; the crisis of "consent" essentially affected the social classes that in the past had been most accepting of—or had even expressed support for—fascism; among others, who until then had been more resistant or hostile, this instead scored some points in its favor, even if this success was largely fleeting and superficial. To fully grasp the scope of the issue, another factor—no less important—must be added to these two: the Fascist leadership and

Mussolini in particular were always fully aware of both of these phenomena and were able to track

them in all their developments, phases, and specific aspects thanks to the dense, watchful intelligence network through which, first and foremost, the police[1]M, but also the Carabinieri, the party, the militia, the "Duce's" private secretariat, and even individual party leaders (who could not directly access official sources of information or who desired more timely information tailored to their power struggles) had enveloped the entire country, without distinction and at all levels. Very little escaped this extremely dense and, all things considered, efficient intelligence network; certainly less than one might be led to believe based on facts and behaviors known to us today—which we are often led to assume must have been ignored at the time, since it seems absurd to us that they did not trigger direct repressive measures. In reality, such interventions very often did not occur—not because of ignorance of the facts and behaviors in question, but because the regime's logic (avoiding "scandals," respecting certain internal balances, not losing individuals whose unorthodox behavior caused little harm, etc.) or that of the police (better monitoring certain circles and their connections, creating new sources of information, etc.) or that of the heads of individual intelligence services ("filtering" certain information based on their personal relationships or to establish contacts with certain circles in anticipation of the "post-Mussolini" era, etc.) led to these incidents being ignored. Although, of course, not everything reached the "Duce's" desk, and there were certainly attempts—whether out of flattery, careerism, or ignorance—to present reality to him in a more rosy light, what Mussolini did know was a great deal, more than enough to make him fully aware of the mood of the country.

And yet, one can say anything except that during these years Mussolini was (apart from cases where it benefited the monarchy) truly concerned about this crisis of public support. Certainly, he monitored it, kept it under control, and sometimes intervened with initiatives aimed at curbing it. A typical example in this regard—even if it had other motivations as well—was the replacement, in late October 1939, of Starace, by then universally disliked, with Ettore Muti as secretary-general of the PNF1W. More on this, however,

109 The police had three streams of information: those that flowed directly to the chief of police, those that flowed to the prefects, and those that flowed to the police commissioners. Every evening, Bocchini sent Mussolini the most important news and reports of the day, accompanied by his personal notes. He then went to report to him weekly (initially, the reports had been daily).

110 Starace's removal from the PNF secretariat sparked genuine enthusiasm in all circles. The "Starace" file in the Confidential Correspondence of the Duce's Private Secretariat (1922–43), subfolder 1, contains several highly significant letters. One begins as follows: "Your Excellency, what joy! What joy! What joy! Do you know that there was a cry of jubilation—everywhere? Has the reign of the mafia, of the organized Camorra, finally come to an end? The reign of the most shameless corruption?... But

it did not. Not even where his moderating intervention could have lessened the intensity and spread of discontent in certain circles most directly targeted by the social polemics and populism of youthful fascism and, more generally, curbed to some extent the psychological detachment from the regime of ever-wider sectors of the traditional ruling class and its intellectuals; two sectors of society to which he had once devoted great attention and which he had sought to win over, even at the cost of displeasing the most genuine and uncompromising fascists. In previous volumes and also in the first volume of this one, we have often, directly or indirectly, addressed the issue of "consensus." Drawing conclusions from what we have observed over time, it seems to us that the issue can be framed in these three terms, which correspond to the three levels that consensus had assumed, especially from the late 1920s until immediately after the Ethiopian War, when it reached its peak.

At a basic level, there was the “consent” of the still preindustrial sectors of Italian society, the vast majority of whom were essentially detached from the political sphere and for whom the fascist regime often differed in virtually no way from the previous regime. Especially in certain mountainous regions and in the South, this type of consensus was a fact that cannot be overlooked; it took the form of a passive acceptance of reality and, in terms of cultural and “political” behavior, an adoption of the stance of the clergy (often local) and the local elite. At this level, if it became politicized at all, this consensus was reduced to the myth of the “Duce,” the “good father,” the “son of the people,” the “man of providence,” and so on. It is no coincidence that the iconography of the “Duce” expressed at this level often took on naively religious characteristics. And it is no coincidence—and indicative of the isolation and lack of information in which life still unfolded—that it was from these circles that a large portion of the letters written to Mussolini by strangers came, imploring his help even several days after July 25, 1943.

At a second level lay what can, broadly speaking, be defined as bourgeois consensus, as well as that of a portion of the more strictly working-class sectors that shared, to some extent, in bourgeois culture. This consensus was largely superficial and passive. Its most prominent characteristic had been of a conservative-patriotic nature, with some “modern” elements that, in general, were above all a reflection, on the one hand, of the progress Italian society was making along the path of what Mussolini was doing, and on the other, of the fact that “he is a loyal man, he is a gentleman—why would he tolerate having that devious enemy so close to him? Because he was an enemy, believe me!...” And another: “Thank you, Duce, for freeing Italy from the ‘Starace’ nightmare.”

modernization—and, therefore, also massification—which they sought to counter and regulate through a “revolution from above”; and, on the other hand, the quest for security (and, therefore, for order—not only political and social, but also moral and psychological) sparked by the gradual dissolution of traditional bourgeois personal and social relationships brought about by modernization, which, in turn, led to an intensification of nationalism—understood, more as a very strong sense of national community—that is, the extension of the unifying principle to the social sphere—and, at times, of Italian civilization (heir to Rome, the Church, and humanism), understood as a unifying, rationalizing, and regenerating force, rather than as imperialism in the strict sense. At this level, the regime had been conceived above all as a political, social, and moral necessity and, in concrete terms, as a form of authoritarianism that was, all things considered, moderate and directed essentially against the threat of new social conflicts and against those who, unrepentantly, rejected it. An authoritarianism that, moreover, was not supposed to exceed certain limits; it was not supposed to go too far, much less undermine the underlying social balance or infringe upon the prerogatives and autonomy of both the ruling class and the major “guardian” institutions (the monarchy, the army). At this level, the PNF—as has been noted—generally did not enjoy much sympathy. Its leading figures were almost always unpopular. A respectable member of the middle class, even a “fascist,” might have dealings with them, but felt different from them. A well-known physician, a staunch fascist who served as a member of parliament for several terms and later as a national councilor, would see Farinacci when necessary but made sure he did not visit his home and that his daughters did not come into contact with him. The well-regarded, respected fascists were the former nationalists, the former sympathizers, some moderates like De Stefani and Giuriati, at most a few war heroes—who, because of their “blue ribbon,” enjoyed preferential treatment—or someone like Balbo, for his human warmth and his aviation exploits. And then there was Mussolini, the “Duce.” In these circles, Fascism was Mussolini—or rather, Fascism was accepted; people were Fascists because Mussolini was the “Duce of Fascism.” A man with a murky past, who for some still posed a question mark, a source of vague unease, but who had reformed himself, and for most, that was what mattered. A man who was sometimes unpredictable, capable of rash moves that he would have been better off not making, but—finally!—“a man.” A man

who, for some, had saved Italy and made it respected throughout the world, and whom others felt they could not do without, since the entire structure of the regime rested on him, and without him, either everything would have collapsed (and worse, for the hatred of the vanquished would have flared up even more furiously) or they would have had to contend with an intransigent fascism, which only he was capable of controlling. And, furthermore, he was the man who had brought the Conciliation to Italy, had preserved it from an economic crisis that had struck other European countries, had "redeemed" the Pontine Marshes, had provided it with roads, public works, trains running on time, "cutting-edge" social legislation, had restored Libya to it, and, in the end, had given it the Empire. In the face of these "successes," for many, the negative and troubling aspects of the regime—though recognized—had receded into the background, becoming almost exclusively the subject of grumbling and essentially harmless jokes, while the myth of the "Duce"—fostered, instilled, and celebrated daily by the regime's entire propaganda apparatus—continued to spread.

With this—let us be clear—we do not mean to suggest that this type of consent had transformed or become more active. Any active consent, to be truly such, requires political participation, a genuine critical spirit, and accurate information. All of these elements were lacking in this consent—despite the myth of the "Duce"—or were replaced by mere membership in the National Fascist Party (PNF) and/or in fascist mass organizations, and by participation—sometimes spontaneous and heartfelt, but often merely obligatory—in the regime's demonstrations and initiatives. It is a fact, however, that this largely and superficially passive consensus had, year after year—and especially as a result of the victory in the Ethiopian War—expanded and would continue to expand to some extent until around mid-1938. Nor, once again, should this come as a surprise. Fifteen or more years of "full" fascist rule—and, this should not be underestimated, years of victory for fascism to the point of making it seem invincible— fifteen or more years—for most people—of isolation from the rest of the world, of selective and targeted information, of continuous propaganda, and of the ever-diminishing presence and credibility of alternative voices—could not fail to have some impact at all levels, and especially among those least convinced of the necessity—moral above all—to resist external pressure, particularly when, during the war in Africa, even some symbols of resistance seemed to waver.

Those were—as Laura Lombardo Radice[111] recalled—the years of consensus, of victory in Ethiopia; it seemed as though that regime would last a century. And even among the anti-fascists, a dramatic problem was emerging: "What will become of our children? Is it right for them to continue on our path, thereby closing off every possibility of a career—and even of a life?"

In fact, in some anti-fascist families, the older generation was now grappling with a moral dilemma: "I am who I am; I made my choice long ago, but I don't want to harm my children."

In a certain sense, one could say that this consensus reached its peak at the very moment it began to crack.

Much has been written about the crisis of consensus that began almost immediately after the end of the Ethiopian conflict and developed in the following years. We ourselves have referred to it repeatedly in the preceding pages, albeit with a clarification on which we feel the time has come to be more explicit, since otherwise we run the risk of distorting the entire reality of the period we are discussing by attributing to the crisis of consensus—which pervaded the entire period and, to a certain extent, defined it, characteristics that it did not possess and that were instead characteristic of the years of Italy's participation in World War II—and especially of the final years, when the fortunes of the war for the Axis powers took an increasingly and irremediably dire turn. In the preceding pages we have spoken of a "crisis of consensus," while also specifying what, in our view, was in the vast majority of cases the

defining feature of this crisis: a “psychological detachment from the regime.” Vast, very vast, underpinned by certain common motivations and countless specific ones (“there is perhaps no Italian who does not have at least one point of disagreement with Fascism,” as the Communist Party rightly wrote in November 1938 in a pamphlet outlining political strategy and instructions for action in Italy [2]), but, except for quantitatively negligible cases, nothing more than a psychological detachment. With the exception of a few specific cases—concerning mainly certain young intellectuals—it would be profoundly wrong to speak of political opposition, not to say active opposition, but even conscious opposition.

On the surface, it would seem that many factors should have led in this direction: the “disappointment of the hopes raised by the conquest of the Empire,” the intervention in Spain, the ever-closer rapprochement—ultimately leading to an alliance—with Germany, the growing danger that all this would lead to war, autarky, economic difficulties, the regime’s progressive drift toward totalitarianism, its intrusiveness, isolationism, and militarization, the new conflict with the Church over Catholic Action, the adoption of anti-Semitic legislation, the anti-bourgeois polemic, concerns about the populist character that, driven by labor unions and youth movements, fascism seemed to be assuming, the growing impatience with propaganda and mass mobilization that—no longer drawing, as in the past, on public sentiment, cultural motivations, or more or less vague aspirations that were, for better or worse, real and widespread—were increasingly perceived as alien and often at odds with them; the increasingly widespread disdain for the regime’s leaders; and so on. In reality, all these factors were not enough to create a genuine and conscious opposition and, ultimately, not even to lay the groundwork for one at the spontaneous level. Aside from the fact that—as Italo Calvino113 rightly wrote—“between judging fascism negatively and active anti-fascist engagement there was a distance that perhaps today we can no longer gauge,” fifteen or more years of “full” regime had produced a breakdown and set in motion a series of social mechanisms of which the vast majority of Italians had not even been aware and which by then constituted a reality—not only impossible to break from within, paralyzing and which, moreover, on the one hand, developed on its own and, on the other, concealed itself from most people through the force—which is, after all, the true great force of all totalitarianisms, without which even repressive force is insufficient—of what is, of what ensures order (which, all things considered, is a source of guarantee and security), and of what has no alternatives.

Regarding the moral breakdown, the demoralization of life—which it claimed, on the contrary, to want to elevate to a higher ethical level upon which to found, in fact, a new civilization and a “new order” valid for all European nations—its reduction to slogans and myths “of short-lived and theatrical popularity” and to the satisfaction with immediate—and therefore contingent, inadequate, and instrumental—results—so much has been written that it would not be worth dwelling on it, were it not for the fact that it is extremely significant to refer to what, a few years later, Alberto De Stefani would write in his aforementioned 1941 essay *Confidenze e convinzioni**, leaving us a testimony that is not only beyond reproach but of the utmost interest for understanding the moral drama that this failure must have aroused at a certain point in the hearts of those fascists who were aware of it and understood that fascism had gone far beyond the primitive aims they had assigned to it:

More than ever, we live in a contradictory, inconsequential atmosphere, fraught with uncertainties and anxieties that pervade our souls, caught up in the upheavals that shake the fabric of history, which are tossed and turned this way and that without our truly knowing why.

Restlessness—born of positivistic relativism and giving rise to a disposition toward the most lamentable inconsistencies—has gradually replaced the stability of the original xx.

principles and sentiments—which has ceased to be an imperative and a way of life since we perceive it as monotony and, as such, find it burdensome. A sort of existential absolute, confined to current events that can even be passed off as history, is passed off as a universal absolute...

The sophistication of truth—which has been identified in desires and the actions that bring them about—has even freed us from the concern of seeking out prudish dialectical alibis that in other times were used to justify motives and acts, and as remnants of an individual and social absolute standard not yet entirely eliminated. Even moral repentance—the ultimate stirrings of character—is becoming increasingly rare as a state of mind that tends to renounce an intention or an act, that is, to counter the existential, which, in its relativistic skepticism, does not bother to raise the question of virtue and guilt.

The spread of a purely existential standard of conduct coincides with the expansion of legal regulation over life. The proliferation of rules and their application to acts and relationships already governed by moral imperatives, and this pragmatic existentialism—which in turn spreads while eroding us—may seem like contradictory and logically mutually exclusive phenomena. In reality, they are not. Legislation conceived solely as the product of a general and mutual interest—and inspired exclusively by it—establishes obligations and limits for the common good, suggested by transactional and utilitarian expediency. The legal order agrees with the moral order and is an expression of it only insofar as the law presupposes and realizes an absolute that is effectively felt by those to whom it applies and who must observe it. But if these two conditions are lacking—and insofar as they are lacking—the two orders stand in a non-necessary relationship to one another, and the expansion of the law does not necessarily imply the expansion of morality; just as, on the other hand, the fact that disputes and violations of the law are decreasing, while politically significant, does not constitute a sure moral indicator. Charity cannot be replaced by social security and insurance; the fear of God by regulations protecting religious worship; love of one’s neighbor by the law of obligations; family duties by family law; truthfulness by the prohibition against slander or false testimony; wisdom and enlightened judgment by a school diploma.

Formal respect for the law is compatible with inner disorder and with the most wretched and opaque moral misery; the law alone does not have the power to remedy it, but merely to render it legally—and not socially—harmless... The legal order, however, creates and reinforces the illusion of an order of souls...

In the philosophical-political struggle to transcend the individual and replace it with the category, the union, the masses, or the state, we have perhaps gone too far at the expense of their moral foundations, which are charity and love of country and neighbor. These are values that should never grow old!...

The grand process of renewal in which we are engaged goes beyond the well-founded demands for autonomy across the continent and the Mediterranean and also includes the aim of establishing a new order, which—if it is to be new and to compensate for the suffering endured—should be different from and better than the orders already known and shaped by the peoples, as well as the pre-existing teleological and structural constructs. Not merely better as a myth or ideology, or as a resolution or label, but better in concrete terms—and therefore one that relates to the inner life of the individual, families, and peoples, and serves as both an expression and an instrument of their fulfillment and nobility... All of this touches on the very essence of civilization; statesmen and politicians cannot dismiss it as something foreign or beyond their reach, for they themselves employ this “lever-word” as a dialectical and teleological tool. Laws and the legal-administrative structure alone are not enough to create a new type of civilization...

As for social mechanisms, two were the most important for the purposes of our discussion. Under the guise of extreme mass politicization, there was an increasingly marked and effective depoliticization of society which, on the one hand, led to an ever-more pronounced detachment from and growing disdain for the PNF[115] and, on the other hand, to an almost universal aversion to politics itself—an aversion that made it unthinkable for most people to engage politically against fascism and discredited the democratic model a priori. And an equally marked fragmentation and dispersion of social forces (and, therefore, of their potential to act politically within the regime) into many distinct entities, each closed in on itself and with its own problems and forms of control over dissent, but all dependent, each through its own channels, on the state, with the result that mounting economic difficulties led them to focus and withdraw ever more into themselves to address their own problems without regard for those of others, and to rely even more heavily on the state, becoming increasingly dependent on it even if they did not share its general policies. Although socially and politically failed, the corporatist organization proved, in this regard, to be a powerful tool for integrating the various entities into the state and, therefore, for fostering consensus, providing them with the necessary cover to ensure that—in the protection of interests and the implementation of sectoral agreements—what De Stefani termed "materialistic interests"[6] prevailed, that is, their self-defense at the expense of the collective.

Given this reality, a shift from psychological detachment from the regime toward dissent and opposition—even if only internal—to the regime was unthinkable within this type of consensus, and it is significant that even the communists had realized this. Speaking in Moscow to a group of Italian comrades in January 1937, it was no coincidence that Togliatti identified for the communists, as "the problem of the hour," "to unite everything that fascism has divided: to unite the working class, economically and politically; to unite the workers with the peasants; to unite the proletariat with the middle classes; to unite the north with the south; to unite the older generations with the younger ones."117 And the following year, in the aforementioned pamphlet *'18*, which set out political guidelines and instructions for action in Italy, the communists acknowledged that "the masses will never automatically come to us [communists and anti-fascists in general]; but it is we who must draw them to us, set them in motion, and guide them." And—even more significantly—rather than toward this type of consensus, they directed their attention and their "entryist" action toward the more politicized and active segment of Fascist militants and cadres, thus clearly demonstrating that they realized that at the level of the more general consensus (even if psychologically fractured), depoliticization, moral decay, and social fragmentation made any action practically hopeless and futile, whereas at the level of the more politicized and active consensus, there were greater opportunities to capitalize on the disappointments, discontent, and sincere social and revolutionary aspirations of at least a portion of the fascists. But we will discuss this last aspect—which pertains to the third level of consensus, namely the active one—in a moment. Now, to conclude our discussion of the second level, we wish to highlight two other reasons that rendered the psychological detachment that had occurred within it practically ineffective and allowed the regime to almost completely regain this consensus on two grounds "superior" to that of the fascist regime.

The first of these reasons was the considerable hold that nationalism had at this level. This included both what we might call the patriotic-Risorgimento style—which was based on Mazzini's conception of nationality and the duty of citizens to serve the community—and the more modern and extreme form typical of fascism, which the regime had largely borrowed from the nationalists, tending to use national values as a tool for uniting the entire population around the idea of the nation's collective interest—understood as an absolute value superior to all others—as well as the bearer of a new civilization and a new "primacy" of the Italians. An essential component of this nationalism—already present in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Italian culture,[119] but now elevated to the highest degree to the point of becoming a fundamental element of the regime's propaganda and rhetoric, as well as of

its official culture and the education of young people—was the myth of Rome and Romanity.[120] Year after year, this myth was exploited in every possible way and adapted to all circumstances and specific needs: to support Fascist ruralism (the celebrations of Virgil's bimillennium were organized along these lines) and the demographic campaign (the fight against celibacy and infertility was a heavily emphasized aspect during the celebrations of Augustus's bimillennium), to bolster Mussolini's foreign policy in its various phases (Pax Romana, imperial expansion, Mare Nostrum, the struggle against Carthage—presented as the counterpart to the struggle against England)—and (on the part of moderate Fascists) to strengthen the state through gradual adaptation to its new needs121 and even to cautiously begin to raise the possibility that Mussolini, upon the death of Victor Emmanuel III, might be persuaded to assume the king's functions in some way, just as Augustus, upon the death of Lepidus, "was led to assume the pontifex maximus" with the consent of a "multitude of electors such as Rome had never before seen" coming "from all parts of Italy"122. And, more generally, to make ancient Rome—with its virtues and power—the model toward which the "new Italians" should strive, aware that there existed a "unity of concept and method in Italian politics throughout the centuries," of which Mussolini and fascism were the interpreters.[123] All of this was aimed at promoting two other myths. That of the universalism of Roman civilization, of which Fascist civilization was to be the revival in modern terms, about which Pietro De Francisci wrote in 1939 124:

120 There is a lack of comprehensive studies and significant detailed analyses on the myth of Rome during the Fascist period. Some useful observations can be found in the contributions by L. Canfora, "Classicism and Fascism"; by M. Cagnetta, "The Myth of Augustus and the Fascist 'Revolution'" and "Notes on Colonial War and 'Roman' Ideology"; and by P. Fedeli, "A Study on the Use of Latin in Fascist Schools," in *Cultural Matrices of Fascism*, Bari 1977, pp. 85 ff., 153 ff., 185 ff., and 209 ff.; and also by M. Cagnetta, *Classical Scholars and the Fascist Empire*, Bari 1979; as well as by L. Perelli, "On the Fascist Cult of Romanity," in *Quaderni di storia*, January–June 1977, pp. 197 ff.; and, finally, by D. Cofrancesco, "Notes for an Analysis of the Roman Myth in Fascist Ideology," in *Storia con temporanea*, May–June 1980, pp. 383 ff.

Even today, walking in accordance with the guiding principles of our tradition, we are laying the foundations of a universal civilization. But for this edifice to be solid and to reach the heights toward which its Founder aspires, the initial energy must not only be preserved but must increase as the construction develops and rises. Our blood and our spirit—which we have rediscovered after eliminating and purging the foreign elements that had infiltrated them—must maintain their purity, their richness, their strength, and their warmth. For this reason—that is, precisely for the fulfillment of our universal mission—we stand ready to defend our race, our tradition, and our soul: because history teaches us that when Italy declines, all horizons darken and the world is impoverished; and that when Italy is reborn into a new era, all the heavens are illuminated by the light of its civilization.

And the myth of Mussolini—a new Augustus for some, a new Caesar for others, and perhaps for the majority—who was presented as the most quintessential and conscious embodiment of the Roman tradition, having revived it in the "Second Empire of Rome," born—as was written not by one of the usual propagandists, but by one of the greatest ancient historians of the time, Luigi Pareti125—through the virile power of our people and their new, imperative demographic, material, spiritual, and moral needs; having arisen so many centuries later, in a new historical climate; animated by a new and highly original Genius of the race—presents itself, in many respects, as politically and ethically superior to the first, and with its own new message to spread.

Thus, through the myth of Rome and Romanity, nationalism—already alive in its own right among the bourgeoisie—also flowed into the most important myth of all, that of Mussolini, which constitutes precisely the second of the two reasons by which the regime managed to regain—as we were saying—almost completely the consensus that had otherwise fallen into crisis.

Numerous explanations have been offered for the myth of Mussolini, covering a wide range of perspectives and drawing primarily on social psychology and its application by the mass media. Mussolini as the "strong man," the "good man," the "just man," the "father," the "masculine figure," the "embodiment of national character," and so on—these are all aspects of the myth that have been invoked to explain the myth's own success. It is not our intention to delve into these kinds of issues. For the purposes of our discussion, it is above all important to note the presence of the myth and its impact on all three levels of consensus we are discussing—and, in a certain sense, especially on the second, the "bourgeois" level. As for its explanations, three are, in our view, essential. One is immediately apparent: the charisma that Mussolini undoubtedly possessed. Another is certainly the one to which everyone generally refers: the massive, relentless, sometimes crude, at other times quite sophisticated (enough to achieve results even among foreigners) campaign waged by all mass media outlets—and not infrequently by the cultural sphere itself, even the least subservient sectors—aimed at spreading it everywhere, in every possible form, highlighting all aspects of Mussolini's biography and personality, resorting to the most far-fetched historical parallels and even to ancient prophecies and age-old legends. Consider, to give just one example, that in a pamphlet for the Arab Youth of the Fasce (the Libyan GIL), Mussolini's greatness, power, and success were attributed to the fact that the famous Ring of Solomon, which had been lost for millennia, had mysteriously reappeared—and thus by divine will—in Rome, in the hands of the "Duce"126. We do not believe it is worth dwelling on either of these explanations. The third, however, deserves discussion, especially since it has only recently begun to be outlined.[27] We are referring to the concrete, widespread efforts to support the Mussolini myth carried out—especially in the mid-1930s—by the Duce's Private Secretariat. It would certainly be excessive and unfair to assume that this effort was conceived as a means of supporting the myth of Mussolini (at least initially, as it undoubtedly arose organically, as a matter of routine bureaucracy, while it is more difficult to rule out that its political significance was not recognized at a later stage) and that, moreover, it was largely a consequence of this myth, yet it ultimately became a significant and important aspect of it, one that certainly should not be underestimated in understanding all the nuances of public support.[128]

A new, greatly expanded edition of this work, *Passato e presente d'Italia. Saggio storico-politico* (Italy's Past and Present: A Historical-Political Essay), was published in Venice in 1944. It is particularly interesting for its new section devoted to the "facts and problems of the current war," in which, among other things, the parallel between Caesar and Mussolini—already present in the first edition—was revisited and developed in light of July 25: Caesar had been killed by the internal enemy who "wanted to prevent him from achieving new victories, was jealous of his greatness, and had unspeakable interests to defend"; Mussolini's enemies had sought to do the same and had partly succeeded; "but there is also divine Providence! The Great Man, whom the traitors wanted to see tortured by his enemies, was instead miraculously saved, thanks to his magnanimous friend and the heroic executors of his will"... (pp. [illegible number] ff.).

As we have already had occasion to mention, as Fascism gradually consolidated its hold on power and Mussolini's prestige spread, the number of people—old friends and acquaintances of Mussolini, Fascists, well-known figures, lesser-known figures, and above all unknown individuals from all walks of life—who turned to the "Duce" to express their approval, their affection, their enthusiasm (and

sometimes—though more rarely and, of course, anonymously—their dissent and insults), but also and above all to ask him for help, work, and justice, had gradually increased, until, with the war in Ethiopia, it became a phenomenon that was anything but negligible and of a scale unprecedented in Italian history, even compared to the number of those who traditionally turned to the sovereign. A systematic study of the vast body of relevant documentation—much of which has been preserved—is impossible here, even though it would be of the greatest interest.[129] For the purposes of our discussion, it suffices to say that in the year

128 The Duce's Private Secretariat was headed until March 1934 by Alessandro Chiavolini, who was succeeded by Osvaldo Sebastiani and, from June 1941, by Nicolò De Cesare. Its staff—officials, clerks, and subordinates—numbered about twenty in 1925, rising to about forty in the early 1930s, to about fifty in the second half of the decade, and to about sixty-five on the eve of July 25, 1943.

129 Aware of the nature of this documentation, as early as April 1936 Gioacchino Forzano, writing to Mussolini, suggested the idea of publishing a selection of these documents in a volume and offered to take charge of the project personally: "For some time now, I have been planning to produce a publication that would be the finest xv (October '36 – October '37), a year in which the phenomenon had already taken on considerable proportions but had not yet reached its peak; during that year, 123,047 requests for subsidies and 77,578 for employment 13° reached Mussolini from across the country. To these must be added the more specific requests that were forwarded to Mussolini through the ministries deemed competent: in the year xvi, the Ministry of Finance alone transmitted them to the palace to make it known loud and clear to the world what the hearts of the Italian people feel for Mussolini and what Mussolini's heart feels for the Italian people.

a) The publication could even be published anonymously to eliminate any suspicion of personal self-promotion.

b) should be sold for charitable purposes. Translated into four languages.

"The subject matter of the publication should be 'Letters to Mussolini.'"

" Many precious things should be able to be extracted from this treasure trove.

"I once asked Mr. Sebastiani how many letters were addressed to His Excellency each day; he replied: about 3,000. Now: the reasons why people turn to you—how, why; how they are answered, how all this works—could be the subject of a most noble work. I take pride in knowing that my hands and heart are pure enough to undertake this endeavor.

" , I therefore ask you—perhaps with great audacity, which you will justify solely on the basis of my devotion—to allow me to try my hand at this" (ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence [1922–1943], W/R, file "Forzano Gioacchino").

130

Funding Requests		Employment Applications
Piedmont	2,720	2,843
Liguria	1,705	2,592
Lombardy	7 H7	13,865
Veneto-Trentino		975,647

Veneto 7,620 7,147
Venezia Giulia and Zara 1,33i 1,213
Emilia 6,991 4,736
Northern Italy 28,439 33,043
Tuscany 6,826 5,054
Marche 3,48i 1,204
Umbria 1,736,621
Lazio 25,541 8,910
Central Italy 37,584 15,789
Abruzzo and Molise 4,547 2,120
Campania 11,933 8,938
Apulia 7,418 3,405
Lucania 1,358,607
Calabria 6,516 2,684
Southern Italy 31,772 17,754
Sicily 21,635 9,879
Sardinia 3,597 1,113
Island Italy 25,232 io 992
Kingdom 123,047 77,578

ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Ordinary Correspondence (1922–1943), file no. 169621, "Statistics on Petitions Submitted to the Secretariat."

Venice 18 029131. Initially, before the workload became too burdensome, this large volume of requests was processed entirely on a case-by-case basis by the Duce's Private Secretariat, which sought information from the police regarding the individuals involved and, at times, regarding the reported cases; it handled some of them directly and forwarded the rest to the relevant government offices. All were answered, albeit briefly, and efforts were made to accommodate their requests; in a great many cases, a sum of money was sent, varying—for the most common and general requests—between 50 and 500 lire (usually 250), and for others, justified by serious illnesses, deaths, or losses

131 According to statistics compiled by the Duce's Private Secretariat, the requests concerned the following categories and subcategories:

TAXES

Personal property - Land and buildings

large family 785
lack of means 1,350
excessively burdensome, reduction 891
suspension of foreclosure proceedings 124
extension or deferral 87
cessation of business operations or bankruptcy 100
Tax for Unmarried Persons
lack of means 963
excessively burdensome, reduction 877
extension 0 deferral 104
called up for military service 163

unable to marry 116
married 133
with recognized children 104
with dependents 83
Loans and Extraordinary Taxes
large family 306
lack of means 646
excessively burdensome, reduction 682
extension 0 deferment 83
Municipal and Provincial Taxes
large family 57i
lack of means 733
excessively burdensome, reduction 885
consumption tax 56
extension or deferral 79
called up for military service 40
Business Taxes
registration tax 57
luxury and exchange tax 22
stamp tax 26
tax on government concessions 29
inheritance tax 59
school taxes 16
total io 190

OCCUPATIONS: tobacco manufacturing 1142

saltworks 61

Royal Mint 15

State Printing Office 179

Admission to Public Competitive Exams 100

Hiring of Temporary Workers 165

Hiring of junior staff 70

Permanent Appointment 73

promotions 61

Total 2156

SPECIAL LICENSES: retail sales of monopoly goods 591

Lottery booths114

Tobacco cultivation 31

Admission to the lottery career 23

Transfer of monopoly retail outlets 26

renewal of monopoly retail outlets 15

Total 802

PENSIONS ordinary pensions 510

survivor benefits for ordinary pensions 139

war pensions 446

War pension survivors' benefits 140

Combatants' insurance policies 222

Lifetime allowances 38

Severance pay 25

Increase in ordinary war pensions 206

Total 1726

STATE PROPERTY: reduction in state property rents 17

Rent for state-owned houses and land 39

free spa treatments 11

Public Water Diversions 11

Total 78

MARRIAGES BY THE ROYAL FINANCIAL GUARD marriages 169

Denial of marriage authorization 26

Marriage promotions: 23

Marriage-related transfers 17

Total 235

CITATIONS exchange tax citations 61

stamp duty fines 54

Registration tax fines 33

Fines for government concessions 36

Miscellaneous fines 35

Total 239

SUBSIDIES AND REFUNDS subsidies 323

Refunds of unduly paid taxes 26

Refunds of unduly paid taxes 234

marriage and childbirth grants 30

Total 633

ENLISTMENTS AND TRANSFERS Enlistments in the Royal Finance Guard 354

Reinstatements to the Royal Finance Guard 72

Reinstatements of Civilian Employees 42

Transfers, Royal Finance Guard 43

Transfers of Civilian Employees 167

Re-enlistments and terminations of re-enlistments 16

Total 694

MORTGAGES AND SECURITIES bank mortgages 19

Government loans 21

conversion of public debt securities 29

conversion of foreign securities 20

collection of public debt securities 32

collection of foreign securities 5

Debt forgiveness 92

salary assignments 41

Total 239

CURRENCY EXCHANGE exchange of obsolete Italian coins 191

Exchange of damaged Italian coins 23

Exchange of foreign currency no longer in circulation 14

Exchange of foreign currency 16

Return of Seized Currency 43

Total 287

SMUGGLING customs smuggling 34

Illegal tobacco cultivation 17

alcohol smuggling 13

currency smuggling 11

smuggling of manufacturing taxes 4

Import requests 34

export requests 14

Total 127

SECURITY DEPOSITS release of security deposits 71

Payment for Land Expropriation 18

Payment for house expropriation 11

Total 100

COMPENSATION FOR DAMAGES compensation for war damages 118

earthquake grants 35

flood relief funds 9

Grants for Drought Damage 7

Total 189

MISCELLANEOUS miscellaneous 304

Total 304

Grand Total 18,029

of work tools, etc., amounting to thousands and tens of thousands of lire, and for some even to hundreds of thousands (the library of a well-known fascist and scholar was purchased from his widow and later assigned to a public cultural institution). Among the applicants were sometimes even anti-fascists (especially socialists who had known Mussolini personally); the Secretariat took care of them as well and helped them. As the requests became too numerous and urgent (various letters were written in the face of imminent foreclosure or eviction) to investigate them all, the policy was established to automatically send a small sum to all general applicants—even when it was clear they were habitual petitioners—and to thoroughly examine the more complex cases, such as requests for employment and the like. In 1938, the small-scale charity sector within the Secretariat was placed under the direction of Edda Ciano. The political significance of this activity carried out by the Duce's Private Secretariat is evident. Those who had obtained what they asked for (and the requests were of the most varied kinds) or even just a modest amount of financial aid not only saw their trust in the "Duce" reaffirmed, but also spoke of it with relatives, friends, and neighbors (sometimes, as a token of gratitude, they would ask for a photograph of Mussolini, which they would then display prominently in their homes), and word of this spread to still others: in short, a process took hold that spread like wildfire; while it encouraged others to imitate the "lucky one," it also gave the myth of Mussolini a very particular concreteness in '32. Nor were the activities of the Private Secretariat limited to this. In addition to this individual charity, the large sums at its disposal—thanks to a whole range of revenue sources, including contributions from industries, newspapers, and organizations, as well as donations from individuals (sometimes minimal amounts, often in the form of treasury bonds, which were sent to Mussolini)—from the proceeds of *La Provida*, from the Prime Minister's "representation" fund, and from other funds of the Public Security Ministry and the Ministry of Corporations, etc.—were extensively used to support charitable and welfare institutions that approached the Secretariat directly or were referred to it, and to finance, in whole or in part, various types of public works requested by municipalities and various organizations.[133] Other Donations

132 In the *Informazioni Cremonesi*, dated October 26, 1937, the following is stated in this regard: "The acts that the Duce is said to be performing in many parts of Italy on behalf of the destitute—to support families who have fallen into poverty, alleviate suffering, and reward acts of civility and goodwill—are spreading by word of mouth.

"Those who would extol them most highly are the beneficiaries themselves, most of whom do not even hold a Party membership card. Yesterday it was a persecuted professor in the provinces; today, an unemployed journalist, or a former subversive… According to many, these episodes would form a halo no less splendid than many others upon the venerated head of the Founder of the Empire."

Donations were also made on the occasion of Mussolini's trips to various regions (during his trip to Sicily in August 1937, they totaled 3,669,825 lire; during his trip to Piedmont in May 1939, they totaled 9,93°5°o1J4) and on other occasions: for example, on the occasion of the prefects' report delivered by Mussolini in November–December 1938, these amounts were recorded for the provinces we selected as samples, drawn from a survey conducted by the Duce's Private Secretariat in 1943 based on data from 1932 onward.

134 To give the reader a clearer idea of the criteria used for these grants, we present the following list:

Trip to Sicily: August 1937–

Direct subsidies:
to Messina L. 141,900
to Catania 187,600
to Syracuse 109,775
to Ragusa 74,225
to Enna 19,475
to Caltanissetta 36,030
to Agrigento 43,150
to Trapani 54,825
in Palermo 130,825 L. 797,823
Subsidies through prefects:
in Messina L. 100,000
in Catania 200,000
in Syracuse 30,000
in Ragusa 30,000
in Enna 30,000
in Caltanissetta 50,000
in Agrigento 30,000
in Trapani 50,000
in Palermo 100,000 700,000
Wedding grants - Lake Pergusa (Enna) 42,000
Subsidies for unemployed miners in Sticoni
(Caltanissetta) 30,000
Donations to Charitable Institutions:
Enna, PNF summer camps L. 100,000
Palermo, Casa del Sole 100,000
Palermo, Hotel for the Poor 50,000
Palermo, Daycare Center 30,000
Palermo, Istituto suore Croce 30,000 330,000
Grants for various construction and improvement projects:
Nicolosi (Catania), school building L. 130,000
Syracuse, hospital (first installment) 300,000
Enna, reforestation 400,000
Caltanissetta, low-income housing 300,000
Caltanissetta, organ for the Church of Cela 30,000
Agrigento, Mother and Child Home 30,000
Trapani, Casa Littoria 100,000 1,730,000

Trip to Piedmont: May 1939–
PROJECT FUND Novara: Hospital L. 500,000
GIL cafeteria for large families Asti: Setole Street OMI GIL summer camps Alessandria: GIL large families Turin: Military Command Building GIL school cafeteria for large families Aosta: Antei-Torgnone Road 250,000 200,000 310,500 250,000 230,000 230,000 300,000 300,000 230,000 I opo OOO I OOO OOO 300,000 L. 5,760,300

CHARITY FUND Vercelli: Restoration of Sant'Andrea L. 200,000
GIL Headquarters for Large Families, Curino Road Aosta: Aosta Battalion Memorial
300,000 300,000 100,000 20,000 1,320,000
REPRESENTATION FUND Aosta: C. M. Mountaineering School L. 30,000
large families GIL very low-income housing Cuneo: Municipality of Busca large families OMI summer camps GIL meals GIL public works 200,000 200,000 1,000,000 80,000 230,000 200,000 300,000 200,000 170,000 2,830,000

Grand Total

L. 9,930,300 allocated 13,465,000 lire for public works, low-income housing, and social assistance in thirty-eight provinces. The summary figures relating to this entire range of activities, which we have traced in the documentation of the Duce's Private Secretariat, are presented in the following table; to obtain a truly complete picture, one would need to add the sums disbursed through the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (for which we have not found the financial statements) and those sometimes given in person by Mussolini himself and not accounted for in detail:

	Charity (to individuals and institutions)	Assistance (to organizations and institutions)	Total charity and assistance	Construction Projects
1937–38	5 404 9 2 7.8 0	7 050,275.65	12 435,203 45	25 898,378.80
1938–39	6 748,587.05	9 5,934,641.10	16 342,051.15	27 0,267,462.25
1939–40	6 416239.40	io 420858.15	16 837097.55	27 946277.80
1940–41	13,165 245.65	9 2,818,103.5	22 4,470,560.0	2 3,071,686.0
Totals	31 7,349,999.90	36 346,408.25	68 081,408.15	103,943,088.85
Grand Total			172,024,497	

Such a considerable organizational and economic effort—and, it must never be forgotten, one embedded within the broader context of the propaganda campaign aimed at keeping the Mussolini myth alive—clearly served, as has already been noted, political purposes as well, and especially to the benefit of the "Duce's" human image, giving substance, if nothing else, to that part of the myth based precisely on the image of the "good man," "son" and "father" of the people at the same time. This image was extremely important for securing and maintaining popular support—the kind less influenced by other aspects of the myth—but it also exerted an influence at other levels.

At these other levels—and above all at the "bourgeois" level—the power of the myth of Mussolini lay, however, primarily elsewhere. On the one hand, the success that had always smiled upon the "Duce" led even the most optimistic, even in the face of the greatest difficulties and risks, to wonder: "What if, this time too, he were right?" And on the other hand, there was the hope that did not abandon even many of the most pessimistic—and, as Cesare Pavese135 aptly recalled—led them to hope that in the end the "man of providence," "in a flash of genius or magnanimity or common sense, would open his eyes and stop taking risks," and that things would sort themselves out. Not much, as can be seen, but—in a moral climate and a socially fragmented context such as the one we have described—enough to block any possibility of the crisis of consensus developing substantially from unease and psychological detachment into full-fledged opposition. And this, on closer inspection, is the very same conclusion that the best-informed foreign observers—those most attentive to the Italian reality—must have reached in recent years by getting to the heart of the matter. A prime example is the French Embassy in Rome, which was likely the most systematic and perceptive in tracking the repercussions of domestic and, above all, international events on Italian public opinion.

On several occasions, French diplomats in Rome—in addition to attempting to reconstruct the various aspects of the "consensus" on which the regime could rely and reporting to Paris on the negative reactions gradually aroused in various social circles by Fascist policies—asked themselves, between 1937 and 1940, the question of how much economic hardship and discontent with Mussolini's policies might actually influence the attitude of Italians in the event of a conflict with the Western powers. Well, many months later—during which extremely important and increasingly serious events had taken place and the head of the embassy had also changed, making it difficult to assume any preconceived loyalty to a particular view of the situation—the conclusion remained the same: even in the event of a conflict, Mussolini would not have faced any real internal difficulties. On November 30, 1937, after examining the attitudes of the main segments of Italian society, Chargé d'Affaires Jules Blondel wrote[156]:

In reality, the structure of the Fascist regime is sufficiently intertwined with that of the nation itself that the prospect of war could trigger popular movements powerful enough to bring it down. And within Fascism itself, Mussolini's authority remains, by all appearances, absolutely unchallenged, with no sign whatsoever at present that one or more individuals in his entourage—and in particular Count Ciano—are exerting any influence capable of affecting his decisions.

More than a year later, on January 6, 1939, Ambassador André François-Poncet concluded a report of his on the same issues as follows:137

Given all the foregoing considerations—and especially those concerning the widespread discontent among numerous segments of the Italian population—one must naturally guard against drawing optimistic conclusions regarding the resistance the Fascist government would encounter if it were to plunge Italy into a war against France. The view expressed by this embassy during the crisis of September 1938 can be reiterated today. In such a case, the Italian nation would certainly follow its leaders at first, and it would be dangerously delusional to consider the possibility of a shift in public opinion capable of hindering a mobilization directed against our country.

And with this, we believe we have answered the question from which we began: given this reality, the problem of "bourgeois" passive consent did not exist for Mussolini; or, where it did exist, it did not entail concessions or "compromises" that would have been not only contrary to the "Duce's" moral and political conception, but also politically dangerous to the very consensus he now valued most highly—and with which alone he had to reckon politically—namely, the active consensus of the Fascists and the youth, if he wanted—as he did—Fascism to survive his death.

It is not possible to precisely determine the extent of this active consensus. Roughly speaking, however, its main areas can be identified, although they largely overlapped. Although there were certainly opportunists and political hangers-on among them, one group consisted of the leadership of the PNF, the GIL, and the MVSN (a total of 000 members) and, with more significant "losses," of the other major mass organizations of the regime and the labor unions. Another group consisted of "first- and second-generation" fascists for whom fascism was still a living reality and, despite everything, vital or capable of being revitalized. Generally speaking, it can be said that the former were primarily linked to the old intransigent faction, while the latter were found mainly in the daily and periodical press (where, however, there were also many "old-timers") and among the leadership of the more typically fascist ministries—those of Popular Culture and Corporations—as well as in organizations such as the Confederation of Professionals and Artists. Finally, yet another group was made up of young people, primarily the "Gufini." Among these three groups, the differences in mentality, perspectives, and points of reference within the Fascist leadership were significant. Setting aside local situations, in the first group most identified primarily with Starace and—especially as the star of the PNF's secretary-general

began to fade ever more rapidly even at this level—with Farinacci, or, to a lesser extent, with other veteran squadristi from the early days such as Scorza. In the second group, the most prestigious leader was Bottai, to whom the corporatists and a large portion of those who prioritized the cultural dimension of Fascism and a revitalization of the party—though not in terms of the more or less Farinacci-style intransigence—looked to. These same reasons should have made Bottai the virtually unchallenged leader of the youth as well; in reality, however, although he did have a certain following among them, the editor of *Critica fascista* was not as popular as one might think and as has sometimes been claimed; in fact, two factors worked against him: his ambiguity—which was difficult to define but perceived by many young people—and, above all, his essentially idealistic, Gentilianist background, a "fault" that had by then become a deciding factor for the majority of Fascist youth. In fact, even though in practical terms some of the young people looked to certain prominent party leaders for support (namely Bottai, Ricci, Starace, and, on the eve of the war, A. Pavolini and, above all, G. Ciano), most had no other point of reference than Mussolini, in whom all their hopes for the renewal of the regime and the revival of Fascism were centered.

Let us be clear, however: we do not mean to suggest that all young people—and in particular those affiliated with the GUF—were fascists. Not only memoirs but also the press of the time speak volumes on this point. The second half of the 1930s was marked by various phenomena among the youth. Among these, one of the most evident was the intensification of the process of depoliticization that we have already noted for the immediately preceding years.8 A mixture of instinctive disinterest, widespread impatience, and at times disgust with politics led many young people to withdraw into themselves, to seek a way of life that would allow them to be involved as little as possible in politics, in the "worst" case, to take refuge in literature and culture in general—and in particular in that which, while not truly anti-fascist, nevertheless cultivated values that were not fascist139. With regard to these young people—"marginalized, indolent in spirit, and soft in body"—there was no shortage of those—such as the author of the article "Giovani in linea," published on January 15, 1938, in *Eccoci*, the newspaper of the GUF in Cremona—who would have liked to see drastic measures: "either fall in line with us and march at a brisk pace, or step out of the ranks—for they cannot and must not feel the weight of their slowness." For the regime, however, they did not pose a real problem: save for very rare cases, they were in fact absorbed into the vast sea of passive consent. Likewise, at most, neither were the cases of young people from anti-fascist families who remained true to their family traditions: rather than a political problem, they were almost always merely a police matter for the regime—and, moreover, a less challenging one than others who, given the families from which they came, were easier to identify.

Politically, the real problem was posed by young fascists—those who offered active support. Without them, fascism could not have

139 As F. Azzali rightly noted in *Testimonianze di giovani*. "The Crisis of Culture," in *Critica fascista*, November 15, 1938, p. 29, that "while theoretical discussions assert the impotence of a culture not estranged from our real needs, in practice, however, such doctrinal assertions are almost always disproved."

have a future. Setting aside mere opportunists, interested only in advancing their careers, they were, however, in one way or another, all highly critical of the regime, which they reproached for its conformism and its provincial narrow-mindedness—which turned into an a priori closed-mindedness toward the new, toward what was developing in foreign culture 14°, its refusal to grant them the freedom to discuss it and interpret fascism according to their own sensibilities and aspirations, its fundamental conservatism and its refusal to embrace a genuine social transformation, and, above all, its

lack of genuine coherence. This fault, for a youth that, in the final analysis, was essentially in search of clarity and consistency—sometimes in an uncompromising and irrationally emotional manner—was the worst of all, the one from which all the others were deemed to stem. They were so critical that in some cases they went so far as to break away entirely, making it possible for a significant portion of the new anti-fascism (unified or, at any rate, less influenced by the old divisions among the parties) to form within their own ranks; almost always as a result of disappointment with the reality of the regime and the realization that not only was it impossible to improve it, but that it tended to deteriorate and degenerate more and more. During the years under consideration—those that Gino Germani defined as the third stage in the evolution of young people's attitudes toward fascism[141]—cases of a shift toward full-fledged anti-fascism were, however, still relatively rare. For while the events of 1938–39—the Anschluss, the racial campaign, and the Pact of Steel—prompted many young people to, so to speak, "throw in the towel," to disengage psychologically and politically (since numerous obstacles still stood in the way of taking the next step—that of turning to anti-fascism, not least the strong nationalist sentiment that characterized the Fascist youth and prevented them from distinguishing between homeland and government, and the lack of a realistic alternative to Fascism), for the majority these events had no other effect than to increase their desire to transform the regime from within and to bring Fascism into line with the ideal they had formed of it. For most of these young people, the break with fascism would come later, in 1942–43, as a result of the dramatic and liberating ordeal (in every sense, not least that of the lack of a realistic alternative to fascism) of the war. Only then would a portion of them turn to anti-fascism and, very often, to the Communist Party.[142] But another portion

142 See L. Lombardo-Radice, *Fascism and Anti-Communism: Notes and Memories 1935–1945*, Turin 1947, p. 65: "The years between the war in Ethiopia and World War II were not yet, in a certain sense, free from war—insofar as they were 'liberated' from the regime—and those who were 'liberated' in this way would have joined the Italian Social Republic, embracing what was or what they believed to be 'their' fascism."

Even among the young, as can be seen, the divisions—in terms of active support—were therefore very pronounced. As for the years that concern us here, however, it is difficult not to agree with Agostino Nasti, who in 1938, drawing inspiration from that year's *Littoriali*, wrote that, all things considered, the balance sheet for fascism was positive. Of course, the masses were one thing and the elite another; yet the fact remained, as he put it, that we, too, had been an elite: everyone else had followed us. If, therefore, we had succeeded in forming an elite of our own, we could consider our goals achieved.[143]

In short, despite the "crisis of consensus," Fascism was able not only to retain the active support of a large portion of the old-guard Fascists but—far more importantly—to generate new support as well, and, most significantly, among the young, among those who were to ensure its continuity.

However, it would be too simplistic to settle for this observation or merely accompany it with a few remarks, such as the price Mussolini had to pay to secure this youth consensus. That the price to be paid consisted above all in granting young people a freedom of criticism, of the press, and of speech that was not granted to anyone else[144], and in their exploitation (whether out of conviction or for instrumental purposes, in our view) over the years to recruit for the Italian Communist Party in Italy. Without in any way claiming to write the history of the Italian Communist Party during those years, I can say—based on the experience of many rather than my own personal experience—that, at least in cultural circles and among the lower and middle classes, the influence of international events in breaking down the anti-communist barrier and in shaping new political orientations was greater than that exerted by the tenacious and well-directed work of the Italian communists. And this, I would say, lasted until the early months of 1943, until the strikes of March–April." Along the same lines and with

reference to the entire anti-fascist movement, see also G. Amendola, “Interview on Anti-Fascism,” op. cit., p. 147.

144 G. S. Spinetti wrote on this subject in *Twenty Years Later: Starting from Scratch* (Rome, 1964), pp. 78 ff.: “In the independent youth periodicals, those of the federations, and those of the GUF, one could thus sometimes read criticisms of the ostentation, luxuries, and ‘dolce vita’ of certain ‘hierarchs’—without naming them, but written in such a way that they could be identified. Criticisms of their emptiness, as well as of their rhetoric. Insinuations about their abilities, their good faith, and their intelligence. Criticisms of the wealthy, conformist ‘bourgeois,’ the ‘social climbers,’ and the ‘opportunists.’ Discussions about the general unpreparedness of the ruling class, the disorganization of various state bodies and offices, the high cost of living, and speculators in times of war and peace, as well as profiteering and the “accumulation” of positions and salaries by members of the leadership. Highly heated discussions about the doctrine of fascism and the orthodoxy of certain ideas held by figures in “official culture.” Unambiguous acknowledgments that Fascism lacked a true doctrine and its own philosophy. Open accusations against the prevailing system of political representation, in which the belief was not hidden that everything would have to change upon the death of the “Duce,” especially regarding appointments from above. Criticism of corporatism and trade unionism, which were most often considered subservient to the interests of capitalists. Widely divergent interpretations of Mussolini’s concepts of “social justice” and “reaching out to the people.” Open criticism of those who claimed “everything is fine,” of statism, of racism, and of privileged positions

of privilege favored within the regime’s apparatus[145]—two things that the party leadership often viewed with disfavor and sought to counter and exploit by resorting to a series of tactics aimed at marginalizing or corrupting the most committed elements —this is, in fact, implicit in what we have already said regarding both the relationship between young people and Fascism in the years preceding those we are examining, the tendency that had already clearly emerged among Fascist youth to rethink everything and their aspiration to influence the reality of the regime,[146] and the negative effect that, at the start of the war in Ethiopia, the regime’s entrenchment in the motto “believe, obey, and fight”[147], and, finally, of Mussolini’s decision not to curb the youth’s polemics even when they risked becoming counterproductive with regard to the attitude toward the regime of the social classes most targeted by these polemics and, more generally, the emerging social orientations among young people. And this, it should be noted, despite the fact that Mussolini was fully aware that anti-fascists—and in particular the communists—were leveraging these trends to develop their “entrist” strategy and to gain a foothold among young people.[148] If one wishes to understand the relationship between young people and fascism during these years and its distinctive features compared to how it had taken shape in previous years, it is necessary to delve deeper into the analysis.

If one examines the press and, more generally, the writings of young people, the reports and—where preserved—the documentation of the Littoriali, as well as memoirs, one gets the impression that during this period the majority of young Fascists, even when dealing with cultural and even technical issues, were in practice doing nothing more than trying to define their own brand of Fascism and, above all, to bring the regime into line with it,49, and they did so

“aristocratic” or “authoritarian” aspects of the hierarchy... In other words, the young people felt freer than their elders in advocating their ideas, both because their criticisms were more tolerated than those of their elders, and because, in criticizing Fascism, they did not claim—as their elders did—to be referring to their own past.”

In the same vein, see also what R. Zangrandi wrote in *La generazione degli anni difficili* (op. cit.), p.

279.

145 Young people who distinguished themselves, especially in the Littoriali, were immediately utilized—according to some, “too much and too well”—in positions of national importance, often depriving the periphery of individuals who would have been valuable there. See V. Zincone, “Funzione dei Littoriali. Cinque anni di esperienza,” in *Critica fascista*, May 1, 1938, pp. 196 ff.

148 Bocchini’s first detailed circular on the Communists’ “entrist” activities is dated July 31, 1936. It was followed by others on November 9 of the following year and April 7, 1938. This last circular is particularly interesting, as it links this activity to certain anti-Nazi demonstrations that took place during screenings of LUCE documentaries featuring Hitler and, more generally, reports (also collected by the anti-fascist émigré press) regarding “attitudes adopted by university and high school students that were decidedly hostile to the Rome-Berlin Axis” in various locations, especially in central and northern Italy, ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Division of General Affairs and Research (1903–49), circulars, boxes 13 and 15, and (1920–43), 1938, box 31.

almost always asserting that they felt “without mentors” (a motif that would resurface in the postwar years, inverted and laden with polemics against anti-fascist culture, just as it had been then against official fascist culture) and that they identified solely with Mussolini’s teachings, debating all the cultural, political, and social issues of the day (almost always in terms that had little in common with fascist orthodoxy or, if they were in line with it, were nonetheless at odds with those fascists who did not act in accordance with it), participating in the *Littoriali*, engaging in union activities, going to fight in Spain, and above all discussing, both within the movement and with his elders, the reality of the regime. And all this very often gave the impression of either going in circles and petering out into quarrelsome verbal polemics (against the bourgeoisie, capitalism, conservatism, etc.)—pyrrhic and an end in themselves—or of positioning itself, through its criticism, outside and often in opposition to fascism. This is certainly, at least in part, true, but it does not actually explain anything and ultimately leads to conclusions that—even before being historically unacceptable—leave one perplexed by the palpable contradiction at their root.

A typical example is the position of Ruggero Zangrandi. Recalling his experience, he summarized what “was, broadly speaking, the position of almost all young fascists”—their fascism: a committed fascism, because it was based on the conviction “that fascism was the most modern and realistic expression of socialism”; militant, because it recognized the need—especially for young people—“to ‘carry the revolution forward,’ not against the anti-fascists, who had been routed by our predecessors, but rather in opposition to the latter, now exposed to the temptation of a ‘comfortable life,’ and above all against the ‘profiteers’ of fascism, who were plotting to turn the revolution to their own advantage; or rather, in practice, to cover it up. And these were, clearly to us, the capitalists, the old conservative classes in general, the monarchy, the clergy, the state bureaucracy, and the fascist and corporatist bureaucracy itself.” That said, a few pages later, he concludes: “the generation to which I belong was not, for the most part, authentically fascist”150. A statement that echoes that of someone who, recalling the “extreme freedom of criticism and speech” found among the Littoriali, spoke of “naive black-shirted anti-fascism, more restless than positive,” which nevertheless served “to prevent fascism, at the crucial moment of its existence, from having on its side those intelligent young people whom it had nevertheless pampered and rewarded”[151], and both can be explained only, on the one hand, by an overestimation of the personal experiences of certain young fascists (significant, but atypical) and, on the other hand, by the influence of a historically untenable a priori assumption: fascism was something entirely different.

That there was something different about these young people's fascism compared to that of previous "generations"—the squadristi in particular—was something that even the latter had sensed, albeit somewhat vaguely, at the time. A typical example is what Agostino Nasti152 wrote, drawing inspiration from the 1939 issues of *Littoriali*:

The most interesting observation to make is, of course, regarding the fascist mentality of these young people—a nagging concern and anxious expectation on the part of us "elders."

It is easy to explain: these young people hold almost all the "convictions" associated with the ideas and theories of Fascism; but sometimes we suspect that they lack the "feelings" (illogical, or rather pre-logical), the stubborn, unshakable beliefs that we possess. Not that they lack Fascist faith: they have it; but it seems to us that it is of a different nature than ours. We explain this fact to ourselves by thinking that the Revolution was a passionate event for us, but not for them; in fact, we lived through it, while they have heard stories about it, or, at most, saw it vaguely as children around ten years old. But this fact, even if it causes a slight unease in our hearts, can satisfy our minds—that is, our concern that our work be continued and completed, our desire that our political program be fully realized in history. These young people are fascists; there is no doubt about it. On the other hand, probably due to the lack of the element of "passion," certain perhaps incurable aspects of the Italian soul are alive in them...: a certain ironic skepticism, a lighthearted air, a cold rationalism that opposes everything that is dogmatic truth or a general norm of custom. The attitude of Italians toward Catholicism is instructive.

Nor was Nasti the only one to perceive this difference. Again in *Critica fascista* (and to limit ourselves to this journal alone), we can cite what Aldo Airoldi wrote in response to Nasti himself[153] and, above all, an article from some time earlier by Vasco Pratolini[154] in which, defending

153 A. Airoldi, "I giovani e l'intelligenza," ibid., July 15, 1939, pp. 284 ff. In response to Nasti, the author observed that one could not generalize or draw unjustified conclusions "since, in young people, it is not a matter of an intrinsically apathetic intelligence—one that is detached from the laws and necessities of life and ready to question them at every moment, in order to live solely by such exertion: it is not a matter of cerebral intellectualism, but rather of a ruthless realism, which even assigns to principles—in relation to current experience—a value that is not absolute, but rather, one might say, instrumental. Nor, however, is it possible to speak of true pragmatism, but rather of the effect—more or less contingent and involuntary—of a specific culture brought into contact with a specific historical moment."

In defending Fascist youth against the criticisms of superficiality and wishful thinking leveled at them by some (and which he himself had, to some extent, also leveled), the author reaffirmed his certainty that these young people would not spend all their time knitting "their daily moods against a worldly 'taste' for socializing," but, on the contrary, would find in meditation "the fundamental principle of action," and concluded that, just as wars "are valuable for the bridges they sever with the past," "revolutions are valuable for the future they presuppose, outside—indeed, above—their adversaries and therefore beyond polemics." A clear warning to consider the future of fascism in light of how it was viewed by these young people.[155]

Today, having the opportunity to consider the entire journey of these young people, this "something different" can be brought into sharper focus and appears as the first—admittedly confused—perception of the emergence and taking shape of a "new fascism," typical of the regime's youth, but—despite all its peculiarities—essentially in line with the movement; and if it seems blurred and incomplete to us today, it is because it —unlike the "new anti-fascism," which also began to take shape during the same

period—it was unable to develop fully, since the crisis of ’42–’43 first, and then that of ’45, brought about its end and, in part, its merging into the “new anti-fascism,” particularly its Communist version. And this is true without having to postulate, to explain it, either a spurious or inauthentic fascist origin or an opportunistic conversion. For, while certain distinctive characteristics of this “new fascism” can be identified with certainty, among them are its genuinely revolutionary zeal and its radical rejection and overcoming of the pre-fascist reality—not only as it pertained to its political parties, but also to the very idea of political democracy, which, for this movement, survived (when it survived at all) only within the confines of the party’s internal life, which, moreover, remained a single-party system. On these two characteristics—which explain why those who moved from “new fascism” to antifascism almost always chose the Communist militia—all those who experienced the fascist youth movement from the inside during the second half of the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s are in agreement. Men of

155 E. Curiel, “Bilancio dei Littoriali” (in *Scritti 1935–1945*, op. cit., I, pp. 41 ff.), for his part, while placing great emphasis on political work among these young people, did not consider them in any way inauthentic fascists. As an anti-fascist who, at that time, was writing for the Communists, he considered them, on the contrary, “young people of real value and ability who genuinely wish to achieve a higher form of social justice and demand greater freedom of speech” and who, as such, “are of interest to us today as representatives of a vibrant and fresh current of energy that deserves to be closely followed and supported...”

They had very different personal experiences, such as Gastone S. Spinetti[156], Ruggero Zangrandi[157], and Ugoberto Alfassio Grimaldi, and Eugenio Curiel[158] had been writing about this since 1938. As Alfassio Grimaldi[159] would later write in retrospect, all of this was, for these young people, “a buried world.”

And young people are not inclined to play the role of archaeologists. They could accept the rejection of Fascism, but only to move beyond it—not to return to those positions which, in their inadequacy, had in fact justified its rise. History began on October 28 of that fateful year: before that, there was chaos and utopia.

Other distinctive elements of “new fascism” were a very strong sense of community—not, however, as understood by nationalists or National Socialists, but projected onto the universal as a mission—and an equally strong populism; all of this set within a framework characterized by a fervent and uncompromising spiritualism and by a conception of revolution understood, in turn, as a radical transformation of the way of life, the quality of life, and, therefore, of civilization. In one of the most characteristic writings of “New Fascism,” Edgardo Sulis’s *Rivoluzione ideale*[160], we read:

Revolution is first and foremost a revolt against existing civilization and therefore cannot accept the state of affairs against which it arose. It is always, at the very least, an attempt to replace one civilization with another, to act on the universal. A revolution that does not aspire to the dominance of its own idea—a revolution confined by the national borders within which it arose—is not ideal, but merely a realignment of purely material forces within the framework of the old idea. A revolution that stops at national power is not a revolution, since national power is attainable under all regimes and does not, in and of itself, shift a single line of the civilization within which it is attained. There can, in fact, be a revolution without national power, one that acts on the universal before acting on the national. A revolution that does not lead to a new civilization is a coup d’état more or less in accord with the existing situation...

The goal of the revolution was “man, who, after centuries of forced subjugation, takes back the helm of history.” The bourgeoisie, “responsible for the current sufferings of the peoples,” was to be driven back “into the ranks of the

156 “Democracy, rather than through violent death, seemed to us to have died of its own accord, from old age or illness,” G. S. Spinetti, *Defense of a Generation*, Rome 1948, p. 24.

157 “It is perhaps fair to point out that there was one aspect of fascism that they [the young people] truly shared, without any room for misunderstanding, at least up to a certain point: and that was the polemic against traditional democracy, the ‘paper games,’ and inconclusive parliamentarianism. The young people were in a hurry (as always, I believe) and felt that these ‘old patterns’ now served only to waste time, to delay and bog down the path of the revolution” (R. Zangrandi, “I giovani e il fascismo,” in *Fascismo e antifascismo [1918–1936]. Lessons and Testimonies, Milan 1962, p. 211).

1<fl E. Sulis, *Rivoluzione ideale*, Florence 1939, pp. 34 ff.

“the people, from whom—and from whom alone—the new aristocracy can arise.” And with the aristocracy—an entirely spiritual phenomenon, a matter of conscience and will—comes the hierarchy, “among men, not among the various quantities of men’s possessions, as the irresponsible majority desired in order to guarantee the authority of numbers and the law of matter.” The bourgeoisie, the machine, property (that is, economic initiative), and “the freedom to work less” were the cornerstones of modern civilization and the cause of its moral and material misery, against which the Fascist revolution was to be waged. Sulis wrote further on this subject:[161]

The machine is the true and sole cause of unemployment because all other causes stem from it, from its system... The worker is no longer free in the face of the machine: he has lost the freedom of initiative, the freedom to work, and therefore to live... The measure of civilization is human labor... The standard of living is the strength or weakness of a people. The illusion of attaining a higher civilization by raising their standard of living unsettles the people and drives them into a false life that cannot be their own. In the standard of living of a people free from bourgeois dreams lies the political stability of the nation, the solution to the demographic problem, and the eradication of overproduction and capitalism... Fascism is opposed to a life of comfort and therefore proposes a lowering of the bourgeois standard of living and a stabilization of the people’s standard of living, free from any “conformist” illusions, asserting that material means must always be adapted to man’s ideal initiative—that is, to his mission or task—understanding this idea as the most resolute demolition of dreams of well-being. Means are not the property of life but the weapons of history. This is social justice... Man owns nothing: property does not exist in the economic sense of the term. Every man has the duty to master his share of matter according to the needs arising from the will to fulfill his mission... The state does not deny initiative when it is the will to fulfill one’s mission, but it has a duty to deny and suppress it when such initiative is of an economic nature and aims at personal well-being, which is by definition always opposed to that of the nation. By taking initiative away from money and entrusting it to the idea —that is, to the will to fulfill a mission—the accumulation of individual property is prevented. Property is today the hallmark of the isolated, autonomous individual. The collectivism that has been spoken of as the face of the new era concerns not the economic individual who owns property—who is always isolated within himself—but the mass individual, that is, the one who strives toward property, who desires it, who dreams of it; the potential owner. Both—the potential owner and the actual owner—are two figures of modern anti-history, the product of a material freedom in which they believe they can liberate themselves, while imprisoning themselves ever more deeply. The Fascist idea rejects both and replaces them with the man of mission and the man of duty: the mission of the aristocracy and the duty

of the people. The former holds the means of command: the aristocracies have never acquired property through labor, nor will they ever do so; the people have never owned anything but their labor, which builds the means of command. There is nothing else that is true, necessary, and powerful. The owner is the servant of matter, lost to the mission, and even more so lost to the fatherland.

In terms of his age and certain aspects of his cultural background, Sulis was not a product of the new Fascist generation, but rather of the "middle" generation (he was born in 1903)—that is, the generation of a Berto Ricci, with whom he was also a friend and collaborator. Referring to him in this context may therefore seem somewhat inappropriate. If, nevertheless, we have cited his *Rivoluzione ideale*, it is because we believe that this book—to which we will return in the next chapter—largely reflects many of the moods, cultural influences, and perspectives of "new Fascism" and that, therefore, — although it certainly cannot be considered a sort of summary of it — may serve as a useful point of reference for understanding some of the trends along which "New Fascism" was developing. And this is true even though, given its embryonic stage, there were also other trends—sometimes quite different—but all of which stemmed from the same premises: a strong spiritualism, a sincere revolutionary spirit, and a vivid desire for clarity and moral and political coherence. This explains, among other things, why "new fascism" was also able to take on the "mystical" aspect typical of the Milanese School of Fascist Mysticism, which, founded in 1930, had barely survived until the time of the Ethiopian conflict and then experienced a development and national spread that, while favored by Rome, certainly did not depend on this support—which, in fact, was not enough to ensure the success of other similar initiatives that did not resonate with the sensibilities of the younger generations—but depended essentially on the spirit of "mission" and "dedication to the Fascist cause" that animated the young people who were part of it, and on the polemical significance it held in relation to the all-too-many Fascists who, faced with the "most arduous peaks" pointed out by Mussolini for the revolution, had "stopped at the roadside" and sought to prevent "a return from political engagement to the full and overwhelming revolution of those hours of audacity and struggle,"[62] And it explains, furthermore, how it always took care to clearly distinguish its own Fascist universalism from the old nationalism and—

On the School of Fascist Mysticism, see D. Marchesini, *La scuola dei gerarchi. Mistica fascista: storia, problemi, istituzioni, Milan 1976. As Marchesini writes (p. 134): "Revolutionary radicalism, combined with undoubted honesty and good faith, led the mystics to direct their polemical barbs against 'careerism' and 'opportunism,' against the atrophic fascism of those who 'would like to pin down' the Revolution, reducing it to a vigilant and disciplined guardian of their fortunes—small and large, yet still wretched—forgetting that Fascism is to be served and not merely 'used,' and against the fearful who 'have seen and continue to see in the Revolution only the carabiniere who must guarantee their modest domestic tranquility.' It was a critique of social mores, aimed at moralizing public life, at a process of "reformation" or rehabilitation directed toward "those who focus on the bottom line, people with substantial profits, who have made it big, with all the trappings, who flaunt fervor and generosity as long as the wind is in their sails, only to be ready to ruin everyone if their accounts don't balance, if they've been left off some list of honorees, or because they realize that the Revolution continues without them and without their help."

at the international level—Mussolini's fascism from the various "fascisms" of Degrelle, Mussert, Salazar, etc., considering them right-wing and reactionary movements "that had to be decisively repudiated to avoid being implicated in their discredit,"[6] and, as long as possible, also from Francoism and National Socialism, M.

Crucial to understanding "new fascism" and distinguishing it from that of other fascist "generations" is, above all, the desire for clarity and moral and political coherence—both as a personal need and as an

indispensable factor for renewing the regime from the ground up and instilling in the people a sense of community and of the universal mission it was meant to fulfill. If one does not keep this constantly in mind, many of the attitudes of the new fascist generation become incomprehensible or appear contradictory. A typical example is their attitude toward Germany. As *Fronte unico* wrote on March 6, 1937 (though there are many other examples), the majority of young fascists considered it harmful that Nazi doctrine was characterized abroad "without a doubt as fascist." Yet, even though they were highly critical of Nazism, these young people generally accepted Mussolini's policy toward Germany in good faith as a necessity that went beyond the political realm. Italy and Germany, Fascism and National Socialism, were two distinct realities, especially regarding the methods by which they pursued their objectives. However, since both were fighting against the same civilization, their alliance was not only expedient (to defend peace or to bring about a new civilization, depending on one's point of view) but also more "moral" than continuing with a diplomatic practice consisting of "waltz-like maneuvers" that solved nothing and confused the people. Characteristic of this approach to the issue is what was written in March 1938 in *Roma Fascista* No. 165:

For some time now, through treaties of friendship, non-aggression, and mutual consultation, Europe has been moving toward a diplomatic equilibrium that, at least on the surface, should guarantee stability, without, however, alleviating the state of tension among peoples, which has by now become chronic. This state of false confidence or unjustified mistrust is, moreover, more than understandable when one considers the ability of nations to change friendships and alliances, to aid and protect those they have overthrown, and to overthrow those who have helped them

164 Once again, during the 1938 Littoriali, the distinction between Fascism and National Socialism was repeatedly reaffirmed, while acknowledging that certain similarities in the positions of the two regimes placed them on the same "battle line" (G. Longo, *I Littoriali dell'anno XVI. Guidelines for Fascist Youth, in "Civiltà fascista," May 1938, p. 444) and made a political understanding possible. "But we can never go beyond that," V. Buonassisi warned in "Critica fascista": "There is a Rome-Berlin-Tokyo axis, not a Fascist International."

and protected. Is it possible to believe that anyone who has followed the twists and turns of postwar European foreign policy could have confidence in the durability of a diplomatic protocol?

Not to mention those for whom a "revolutionary" war—such as the Axis war would have been—would have had the advantage of putting an end to both external and internal enemies, thereby finally opening the doors to the realization of fascist "civilization." We will discuss this latter attitude and its concrete manifestations during the war years in the next volume. For now, it suffices to draw attention to the popularity that, during the period under consideration, the model of the "Corridonia-style revolutionary"—which embodied all or most of the myths that fueled the fascism of that youth—enjoyed among fascist youth.

Even more characteristic than the attitude toward Germany was the attitude toward anti-Jewish policy.

Anti-Semitism and racism lacked any real substance or mass tradition in Italy. The former was present almost exclusively in its Catholic form; however, it had lost its dynamism and, except for specific and entirely marginal cases, survived almost exclusively as an element of traditional religious culture confined to very limited circles, despite the revival that certain sectors of the clergy—and in particular the Jesuits of *Civiltà Cattolica* had attempted in the immediate postwar period by reinterpreting, in an anti-Bolshevik vein, the nineteenth-century cliché of Judaism as the "father" and "soul" of all revolutions. When, in the immediate postwar period, this cliché took on a secular version—as it did in

many other countries—even Mussolini briefly embraced it. Unlike National Socialism and almost all other real or supposed forms of fascism in Europe and beyond, Italian fascism, however, was never characterized by anti-Semitism. Apart from Aldo Finzi (a Jew who was, moreover, fully assimilated and converted), the leadership of the Fasci di combattimento did not include any Jews. Among the early fascists, however, there had been more than two hundred Jews, and many—especially given the small size of the Italian Jewish community—were Jews who later joined the National Fascist Party (PNF). One of the regime's ministers, Guido Jung, was also Jewish. And almost all of Mussolini's "muse-like figures" in economic matters were Jewish: in the 1920s (especially during the "quota novanta" policy), with Maggiorino Ferraris, Senators Ugo Ancona and Achille Loria, and later Senator Teodoro Mayer, who, as F. Suvich writes in his memoirs, had been "perhaps the most highly regarded financial advisor."

The only true anti-Semite among the more prominent Fascists had been, since 1920, the editor of *La vita italiana*, Giovanni Preziosi, a former priest who had come to Fascism through nationalism and subsequently aligned himself with Farinacci166. His influence on Fascism, however, had always been very limited, and his anti-Semitism had attracted virtually no followers until 1937–38.[167]

Among young people in particular, racism and anti-Semitism had always been condemned and had constituted one of the main reasons for their criticism of National Socialism and for their view that Fascism was far superior to it. Yet, while it is a fact—acknowledged by the fascists themselves[168]—that the anti-Jewish turn of 1938 met with significant opposition among young people and led many of them to "take a back seat" toward fascism—it is also a fact, one that cannot be ignored, that for many—indeed, the majority—of young fascists who actively supported the movement, this shift did not represent a breaking point or a crisis, and that there were quite a few who sincerely embraced it, even though it was met by the vast majority of Italians and by the fascists themselves with skepticism and very often with hostility '69.

Aside from those who accepted it out of conformity, self-interest, or fear, there were essentially three main reasons that led a certain number of older-generation fascists to approve—and at times even demand—the introduction of anti-Semitic policies in Italy as well. For some, it was the conviction that this constituted a decisive step toward greater and ever-closer cooperation with Germany—which they considered necessary to form a united front against England and France, to make the regime more totalitarian, and to revive an uncompromising political line within the party and the country. A typical example in this regard is the case of Farinacci, for whom racist policy—of which he was one of the most resolute advocates and among the first proponents—was and should be considered a purely political matter; personally, however, he was neither a true anti-Semite nor a true racist (that is, he did not believe in the theory of blood and did not harbor toward Jews the prejudices typical of a true anti-Semite); so much so that three weeks after the publication of the manifesto by the racist "scientists," he wrote to Mussolini[170]:

To be perfectly frank with you, the racial issue, viewed from an anthropological standpoint, has never convinced me. The issue is purely political; I am convinced once again that when scientists seek to serve politics, they compromise every issue. On the philosophical and scientific plane, one can always debate; on the political plane, where reasons of state are at stake, one acts and prevails.

For others (often, but not always, of Catholic background), the driving force behind anti-Semitic policy was essentially the need to preserve traditional and Catholic culture from the corrosive impact of modern culture. For them, striking at Judaism and banishing it was equivalent to severing the roots of modern culture—which denied all traditional values—or, for those who did not see the origins of that

culture in the “Jewish mentality” or in the “guilt” of the Jews (deicide) the origins of that culture, it meant justifying to some extent the struggle against it with the power of a myth that, for better or worse, had its own ancient history and could be revived by appealing to Catholic tradition. Typical in this regard are the cases—different, yet part of a similar operational logic—of the Center for Anti-Communist Studies and, in particular, its Literature Section, which since 1936–37 had embraced the most virulent anti-Semitism (and pro-Nazi sentiment), had been pushing for “book purification” the most extremist solutions and attributed to the “influence of Judaism” even the “pro-Bolshevik mentality” which, in its view, was corrupting certain circles and figures within Fascist culture and journalism—and in particular the “Fascist left” 171; and by a Costamagna for whom, from the day Baruch Spinoza appeared on the philosophical scene, the destructive work against that traditional, fideist, and positive morality—which had sustained the fabric of European nations for millennia—had taken a great leap forward. The mathematical morality of the Jewish-Dutch thinker paved the way for the formal morality of idealism, which even today—albeit with a different emphasis—Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile would like to preach to the Italian youth of the Littorio, 72.

Finally, for some representatives of the Fascist left, anti-Semitic policy had—just as it did for Farinacci—an entirely political value and, for them as well, had to be kept out of the “horrible Procrustean bed” of “a certain science”; unlike the Cremona leader, who viewed it through a pro-German and intransigent lens; for them, however, its positive significance lay in constituting a first step toward giving concrete form to the anti-bourgeois polemic and serving as a sort of litmus test for judging the bourgeoisie. Luigi Fontanelli wrote on this subject in *Il lavoro fascista* on September 4, 1938:

The issue of race—and in particular the resulting, indispensable anti-Semitic stance of Fascism—serves as an extremely effective reagent for distinguishing not only Jews but also all those gray areas in which—under the banner of the most petty “bourgeois spirit”—those from the old ruling classes operate, whose motto might be the following: “I changed my badge because it suited me, but nothing else”... It is therefore excellent that, through the issue of race as well, the vigilant and stern attention of revolutionary Fascism is intensified toward these circles where the most deleterious and corrosive individualist—that is, anti-Fascist—spirit still lurks. It has rightly been written that no less dangerous than the Jews are the friends of the Jews... Those circles that demonstrate little sensitivity toward the issue of race will be precisely those that do not feel the collective spirit imposed by a superior civilization, that do not believe in corporatism except as a system devised not to solve but to avoid or postpone the major social problems of our time... The revolution gives no respite to these elements, to these gray areas that represent the surviving, tenacious mentality of that old Italy—presumptuous, empty, intellectualistic, and sycophantic—which suited everyone and frightened no one... Now they will begin to realize that it wasn’t just thunder: that it’s raining, that it will rain...

That said, if one strives to focus on the distinctive nature of the stance emerging among Fascist youth, it appears essentially similar to what was mentioned earlier, but is also characterized above all by a twofold hope. That of making racism—understood in a much more spiritual than biological sense[173]—the unifying spiritual force of that community—national, but ultimately also universal—which these young people pursued above all else and considered indispensable for truly rooting fascism in the people.

Racism—as stated in the June 30, 1939, issue of the Catanzaro GUF newsletter *Razzismo* —is not only a biological issue but essentially an ethical elevation that touches consciences and sharpens the sense of nationhood, the sense of this human community that knows itself bound by common ties of language, religion, and history, but which finds its strongest element of cohesion in that identity of thought and action dependent on the psychological makeup of a unified race.

And the hope of finding, in the Italians' previous lack of racial consciousness, an explanation for why fascist culture had proved inadequate to satisfy their spiritual needs and, more generally,

173 Regarding biological racism, it should be noted that even after 1938, the fascist youth press published a significant number of statements critical not only indirectly but also directly of it, often emphasizing the "superiority" of Italian, spiritualist racism over German, biological racism.

why Italian society had failed to truly bring fascism to fruition. This attitude shines through here and there throughout the youth press; however, it appears most clearly in readers' letters to "La difesa della razza." In this column, a significant number of young people—high school students, college students, and even a few workers and office employees (among whom one can find the names of journalists, columnists, and politicians who became quite well-known in the postwar period and who often held non-neofascist views) discussed a wide range of topics until early 1941, offering "racist" critiques of all the main aspects of Italian culture at the time and subjecting every value—often including religious ones—to scrutiny and revision. For these young people, racism was a way to finally "understand" and "criticize" the entirety of Italian history, thoroughly attacking "bourgeois corruption," and to finally realize a "religious conception of life." As for anti-Semitism, in this context it was often little more than a pretext to finally put Italians—and Fascism itself—to the test. And at times, the actual anti-Semitic element was so faintly felt that it did not lead to the ostracism of those Jewish authors whom these young people felt culturally and emotionally close to.

In *Roma Fascista*, the GUF's official publication in the capital, a debate took place between December 1940 and April 1941 regarding two years of racism in Italy. This debate is of the utmost interest to us, both because it reveals how, over the course of two years, much of the enthusiasm for racist policies had dissipated in the face of the realization that, once again, the regime had failed to keep the situation under control and that those who had prevailed were the "pro-Jews," the "pietists" 175, and because the conclusion of the debate—which sought to reconcile the various perspectives that had emerged during the debate itself regarding the characteristics of Italian racism—was vigorously contested by a group of young Fascists who argued that racism should be considered solely as an "antagonism of conscience" toward other races,76. The conclusion of the debate, as well as, more generally, the loss of intensity that, as of >41–42, marked the racist commitment of many young Fascists, can certainly be linked in part to the new situation that was beginning to take shape with the military setbacks suffered by Italian forces in Greece and

174 A typical case (which sparked a vehement protest by G. Preziosi in the December 1942 issue of *La vita italiana*) was the initiative announced by Forti's GUF newspaper, *Pattuglia*, in November 1942 to publish a selection of Giulian writers, including Svevo and Saba.

175 The thesis that fascist racism had failed would be explicitly supported—sometimes with arguments not unlike, but stated in no uncertain terms, those that had emerged in the debate in *Roma Fascista*—by G. Preziosi, "Has the Anti-Jewish Battle Failed?"¹ in *La vita italiana*, February 1942, pp. 176 ff.

which gradually spread to large segments of the youth as well; in part, however, they also confirm that —however absurd and even monstrous this may seem to us today, but the historian's duty is to understand, not to pass judgments that, in and of themselves, do not help us grasp reality—for many of these young people, even racist commitment responded to a need for "moral" order and renewal.

What we have said about youth consensus and the "new fascism" seems to us—as far as the period

under consideration here is concerned—to lead to a conclusion that, in turn, brings our discussion of consensus in general back to the relationship between this consensus and the perspectives of both Mussolini and the regime. If, at the stage the regime had reached, the political problem of consensus was reduced almost exclusively to that of active consensus, it is in fact evident that such perspectives could only be different and, at the very least, divergent. For the regime and its more strictly moderate and conservative core ("supporters" or "fascists"—it matters little), the totalitarian turn of the second half of the 1930s and the emergence of "new fascism" could in fact have no other consequence than its positioning itself in anticipation of the "post-Mussolini era" (and to prepare for it in the meantime) with a view to the gradual dismantling—and thus liberalization—of fascism, which alone could have allowed it to build—by drawing on passive support—its own active base capable of countering and politically defeating the one then in place and, what was even more serious for it and potentially harbinger of dramatic consequences for its power, one that was expanding thanks to the new generations of fascists. Unless it declared itself defeated from the outset, this was the regime's only path to survival. It was not an easy path, but, all things considered, not an impossible one to follow—especially when one considers the influence the monarchy still wielded, the role that the Church and militant Catholics could play, the entrenched interests that pushed a portion of "historical" fascism to support the regime, the personal ambitions of those fascists who, rightly or wrongly, could hope to manage the post-Mussolini phase of the regime, as well as the traditional culture of many fascists, including those who actively supported it. A path, in any case, certainly easier than the crossroads at which Mussolini found himself: on the one hand, to live and die within the regime, limiting himself to reaping the benefits that, despite everything, a "totalitarian turn" abruptly ensured him; on the other hand, to try to carry that very "turn" to its extreme consequences by staking everything on his own myth and on that portion of active support expressed by the movement and, first and foremost, by young fascists. A choice—there is no doubt—that would make anyone's blood run cold. And one that, moreover, had to be made by a man who was deeply opportunistic, who had never made any real decisions, who had no trust in people, who could not bring himself to give up the egg today for the hen tomorrow, who was no longer in his prime physically or intellectually, and who—as if all that were not enough—constantly wavered between the opposing poles of realism and peasant common sense and the conviction that "nothing is more imminent than the impossible" and that his historic mission was to "achieve the impossible."

Chapter Three

Mussolini Between Political Realism and the Myth of the New Civilization

The conquest of Ethiopia sparked reactions among Mussolini's collaborators and, more generally, within the Fascist leadership that could in themselves provide material for a book and offer highly interesting insights and confirmations for examining issues such as the relationship between "leader" and "followers" and the political behavior and "responsibility" of those who hold office in modern authoritarian and totalitarian regimes with strong ideological and charismatic characteristics. These are issues that must be kept in mind to fully understand the causes of the "disconnect" in so many centers of power—which by no means moved in unison and often tended above all either to buy time or to bolster the monarchy as a counterweight to the Mussolini faction—which, beneath its apparent monolithic nature, characterized the Fascist leadership after 1936 and, by extension, the regime itself.

As we have already noted, the conquest of Ethiopia brought an end, within the Fascist leadership, to any expression of dissent and any inclination to oppose Mussolini: the prestige and charisma of the "Duce" had been so enhanced that no one now questioned his "genius" or his power. Not even those who would have preferred a different style of party leadership and a different direction for Fascist

policy—and who, for this reason, criticized Mussolini more harshly than they ever had since he came to power—were exempt from this rule. Even though they disagreed with an ever-increasing number of his political decisions and, even more often, failed to understand their logic or the strategic framework underlying them (it was precisely in the lack of clear ideas about Mussolini's intentions and in the irritation at this state of inferiority he had imposed—even more so than in actual dissent from the "Duce's" policies— is where the origin of many people's discontent lies) and fearing more and more that his ideological and personal regression would ultimately undermine what he—and they along with him—had achieved, the idea of separating their responsibilities from his or, indeed, of opposing him (which, by mid-1938, some began to consider) could not prevail over their personal trust in him and the hope, fueled by that trust, that at some point his political "genius" would find a solution that would resolve the situation favorably.[1] And this was true even though, at the same time, an ever-growing number of them—while inwardly dreading the situation that might arise—were waiting with increasing anxiety for the moment when, with Mussolini out of the picture, they themselves could finally take the reins of Fascism and the regime into their own hands and guide them according to their own views and their own conception of Fascism.

It is of primary importance to understand this fundamental contradiction in the moral and political attitude of the faction (though the most significant one; with a few exceptions, the rest consisted of figures who were politically and personally too lackluster and too preoccupied with the prospect of a future without Mussolini to risk anything at all) of the Fascist leadership toward Mussolini; otherwise one fails to fully grasp an entire aspect of the fascist reality of those years—namely, the passivity of so many men, even those who were personally responsible and patriotic, in the face of the drama that was unfolding, a passivity that cannot be explained solely by opportunism, fear, short-sightedness—and one loses the chance to truly understand the very "drama" of Mussolini, which fed on this contradiction, made use of it, and was at the same time tormented by it.

"The Leader?! Who understands him anymore!"..."You just can't understand him

1 As far as can be inferred from the sources at our disposal, the main reasons that likely led those who did not share Mussolini's policies to not dissociate their responsibilities from his were (aside from fear in some cases) either the conviction that purely personal actions were practically futile, or the faith in the validity of fascism, which caused them to overlook individual—even serious—reasons for dissent, deeming them insufficient to provoke an "irresistible moral resistance." This was, for example, the case of Bottai: see his Diary, ff. 598 ff., dated November 8, 1938. For the first case, see what G. Bastianini wrote in *Uomini cose fatti. Memorie di un ambasciatore* (Milan, 1959), p. 244, regarding G. Ciano. In January 1939, when Bastianini asked him why—given his dissatisfaction and his different perspective—he did not resign, Ciano replied: "I am ready to do so if the others would do the same with me, but everyone complains and no one tells him with the necessary firmness that things cannot go on this way. If you were to attend a Cabinet meeting that lasts an hour at most because no one speaks except him, you'd feel far more humiliated than you do in here. Here [at Palazzo Chigi], at least, there's me—and I don't mince words." More or less the same position that, more vividly, De Bono would confide in his diary two years later: "I'd do it myself too; but on the other hand, what good would one person's revolt do?!" And which he had already summarized in October 1938 as follows: "I no longer feel at home here because of so many things falling apart. Should I mention this to the Leader? Never! It would be a lone voice. Everyone—or almost everyone—thinks as I do, but who has the courage to speak up?!" ACS, E. De Bono, Diary, vol. 44, dated March 13, 1941, and vol. 43, dated October 30, 1938.

From a broader perspective—that is, regarding the removal of Mussolini from power—another passage

from Bastianini's memoirs (p. 57) is revealing: "How many, upon seeing him set off down that fatal path, tried to stop him when nothing was yet compromised! But how does one stop a man who holds all the power over himself and the nation in his own hands? Must Brutus's dagger be raised against him? Certainly he is there within arm's reach, but small distances are not always surmountable, and we love him with that tenacious love that feeds on admiration and suffering. We stand there beside him and do our duty as Italians..."

"that man"... "Mussolini cannot be understood." Anyone familiar with the diaries, memoirs, and testimonies of Mussolini's collaborators from the years 1936–40 knows full well that statements like these—taken from De Bono's diary[2]—are far from rare, and that, in fact, one of the most recurring themes in this kind of source is precisely the ever-increasing difficulty Mussolini's collaborators had in understanding the "Duce's" true intentions and to maintain a relationship with him that was, if not entirely normal (since even previously, save for very rare cases, the "Duce's" relations with his collaborators had always been tinged with a sort of more or less subtle ambiguity; moreover, after so many years, a certain erosion of Mussolini's image—as with any "great" figure—was inevitable in the eyes of his closest collaborators), at least transparent. This was due both to his growing "impenetrability" and—contrary to appearances—to the increasingly evident (to them) underlying uncertainty and contradictions in his policies, as well as, finally, to his attitude toward them regarding the various aspects and implications of those policies. An attitude that was at times (though increasingly rarely, especially with the "politicians," since things went a bit better with the "technocrats") open and willing to listen to their opinions and, apparently, to take them into account, but in reality distant, as if he were a man projected into a "higher" dimension and in relation to which the problems they raised seemed to lose their importance or even appear "petty," "outdated," the result of frameworks that had long since outlived their usefulness. Even though, in reality, it was evident that they were not at all, and that Mussolini realized this and felt—and was troubled by—their full weight, he nevertheless seemed unable or unwilling to address them with the realism, the flexibility and pragmatism that had until then characterized his political conduct; and when he acted, he gave the impression of improvising, of being increasingly driven by more or less irrational impulses, dictated not—as in the past—by his "instinct," by his "political genius," but by an entirely subjective vision of what the future of civilization and the major powers would be, by "duties toward history," and sometimes even by mere grudges—in other words, to act against his convictions, compelled by circumstances he could not control.

In memoirs and written accounts published after Mussolini's death and the end of the Fascist era, the authors' expressions of unease and discontent are often accompanied by more or less successful attempts to psychologically penetrate Mussolini's personality. Typical examples in this regard are the memoirs of Acerbo and, above all, those of Bastianini, as well as the account *Ecco Mussolini*, published in 1965 by Grandi.[3] Although differing both in the motivation behind them and in their assessment of individual aspects of Mussolini's personality, these attempts generally share one common point: all of them, more or less clearly, present the image of a man increasingly dominated during this period by two overlapping personalities that often clashed with one another. The same interpretation lies at the heart of the entries that Bottai had dedicated to Mussolini (and to his own feelings toward him) in his diary on July 29, 1940. Since this is a contemporary account—uninfluenced, therefore, by hindsight or by any human respect for a man who had since passed away—and, moreover, unpublished, we believe it is appropriate to reproduce it in its entirety, especially since, among those known to us, it also has the merit of documenting better than any other the fundamental contradiction within much of the Fascist leadership regarding Mussolini during this period[4]:

2 ACS, E. de Bono, Diary, q. 43, entries dated January 10 and November 20, 1939, and January 16,

1940. In the same vein, see what Ambassador François-Poncet reported from Paris as early as the end of 1938: “As the year draws to a close, the Duce’s thoughts and plans remain shrouded in mystery. The dictator’s friends and family members, moreover, are the first to admit that he is shrouding himself in an increasingly impenetrable veil of secrecy, that he is no longer the same as he once was, that he has changed greatly, that he no longer receives anyone, and that no one today—except, perhaps, Count Ciano—can say what he is preparing or toward what goals he is heading.” DDF, vol. II, XIII, pp. 471 ff.

I was reading this passage from Maria Bellonci’s *Lucrezia Borgia*. “It is not easy to define the political character of Alexander VI: even after it has been said that within him, as in all men, many different individuals exist in embryonic form, it will still not have been clarified by what stimulus the manifold forces stirring within his spirit became active—forces that led his contemporaries to say: ‘The pope has ten souls.’”

For some time now—and more vividly in recent months—a similar question has arisen in my mind regarding Mussolini. Everyone senses within themselves that a man’s personality is multifaceted: multiplicity and contradiction, often dramatic, always disconcerting, and a cause of bewildered surrender to the day-to-day. And it is also quite clear that a man of authority, rather than surrendering to them, must master his various traits and use them as weapons of governance and domination. A politician’s politics begin precisely with himself, from within, by recognizing and guiding the conflicting factions that struggle and battle within him. But in an exceptional man, this unscrupulous use of his own multifaceted nature reaches the point of paradox and cynicism.

How many Mussolinis do people fantasize about? Countless. But we must narrow it down to two essential ones, setting aside the lesser ones, which are all calculated appearances, intended to demonstrate a “versatility” to be offered up for public admiration. The Mussolinis—the farmer, the soldier, the athlete, the miner, the factory worker, the man of the world, and so on—are all reincarnations played by an actor, within certain limits that are useful and necessary for a leader. Thus, the Mussolini who is somber, cheerful, tragic, amused, pensive, frowning, ironic, curious, sententious, and paradoxical—who resides at Palazzo Venezia and surprises visitors, even regular ones, every time—is always a Mussolini for the limelight. He is the great “generic” figure of whom experts, from Zacconi onward, say the theater has lost its breed. But, in short, this is “multiplicity” or “versatility” for the sake of performance: deep down, it all boils down to two, to a vital dualism, to a sort of orchestrated “duplicity.” Mussolini one and Mussolini two. Unwittingly close to one another for years, they then grew to know each other more and more deeply—friends, one might say—and conspiring toward a common goal, bound by a pact of alliance in life’s struggle.

Mussolini the First: all instinct, “like a beast” as he likes to repeat, highly sensitive to historical connections, to the secret meaning of events, endowed with an admirable, miraculous power of intuition—a sort of dowsing for history—a true genius of history, whose knowledge immediately translates into action within him. This is a “great” Mussolini, before whom the astonished spirit bows in reverence: enormous—recalling that “piece of nature” from Corradini’s definition—a “one-of-a-kind” figure among the living, visionary and realist, prophetic and concrete, bold yet supremely measured. After all, despite so many definitions and examples, we do not really know what a “genius” is: yet even the simplest and briefest encounter with Mussolini makes us sense that he is a “genius”—an immeasurable and intermittent intelligence, uneven, excellent from a distance, mediocre or nonexistent up close, afflicted by extreme farsightedness. This Mussolini is inimitable, yet exemplary: a star that guides the way, even if it is not at the end of your path, as a lantern might be. But few keep

their eyes on this unattainable exemplarity: it is exhausting to endure and yields no immediate benefits. And so, most turn to that imitation of Mussolini that is possible.

That is, Mussolini number two: a man of everyday life, immersed in his trite “daily routine”; and therefore, cunning, petty, mean-spirited, with the petty jealousies and envies of ordinary men, quick to lie, deceive, and defraud, a dispenser of broken promises, disloyal, treacherous, cowardly, untrustworthy, devoid of affection, incapable of loyalty and love, and perfectly capable of calculatingly getting rid of his most trusted followers. And this, precisely, is the “versatile” and “multifaceted” Mussolini—in the manner of theater actors—of whom I wrote above: the one who disguises his treacherous and base nature as a ringleader beneath shifting guises, roles, and faces. The Mussolini suited to easy imitation by the masses, the one upon whom the cookie-cutter hierarchs have modeled themselves time and again—who, from office to office or province to province, mimic him, echo his oratory, and ape his poses, his frown, his brusque rudeness, his cold haughtiness, and his closed-off pride.

We are forced to live between these two Mussolinis, with a loyalty too keenly felt not to suffer from it to the point of disgust and rebellion, with the awareness that we must serve him while defending ourselves against him, love him while denying ourselves to him, offer him our lives while saving them. A bitter fate: like that of an unconfessable love.

To reconstruct the moral and political climate of the time, accounts such as this one by Bottai—and the others we have mentioned—are certainly of the greatest interest. In particular, the chilling conclusion of the passage from Bottai’s diary conveys it with a immediacy and realism that no historical discourse could ever match. But what value do they hold for Mussolini’s biographer? The thesis of the two personalities—more or less explicitly put forward in these accounts and significantly echoed in some foreign writings of the time (although abroad, the most widespread images of Mussolini at that time were either that of the “realist” politician or that of the “paranoid”5)—is certainly intriguing, but accepting it at face value is just as certainly impossible. Personally, however, we would not dismiss it entirely. In our view, it is in fact a simplified echo of a more complex reality, one rooted in Mussolini’s personality and character and resulting from the ideological evolution brought about in him by the Ethiopian campaign—an evolution he hesitated to make explicit because, in the final analysis, he himself could not fully accept it: rationally, he considered it right, but his common sense was not entirely convinced; he feared it and was aware that it would be neither accepted nor understood by the majority. Hence his “impenetrability,” the inconsistency of his behavior, and the erosion of his political identity and confidence—which many, even among his collaborators and foreign observers, tended to explain in terms of his personality and, quite often, by attributing great importance to the negative influence that his incipient physical decline and state of health were said to have had on his character. Typical in this regard is what the head of the OVRA, Guido Leto,6 wrote:

Mussolini’s tendency never to make a decision on his own and to impose it when faced with conflicting views grew increasingly severe over time, to the point that many believed it was caused in part by his health, which had never been excellent and which robbed him of the energy to deal with recriminations, protests, or other issues.

In light of what we know today about Mussolini’s health, this explanation lacks any validity; on the one hand, it overestimates the influence of physical decline on Mussolini’s character, and on the other, it underestimates—and even reduces to a mere aspect of character regression—the ideological evolution that, in fact, characterizes Mussolini’s biography during this period. It does, however, help illustrate how, as it filtered from Fascist circles to foreign journalists and diplomats—and through them into the

international press—this narrative—thanks also to the fact that after the African War, Mussolini's public appearances

5 During the period under consideration, the most widespread image of Mussolini (especially in the non-popular and sensationalist press) was that of a "realist" politician. A typical example is the article by J. Sauerwein, "The 'Big Four': Three Realists, One Mystic," in *New York Times Magazine*, October 30, 1938. Even a year later (see "Sur M. Hitler et M. Mussolini," in the *Gazette de Lausanne*, September 19, 1939), even C. Jung considered Mussolini a "reasonable" man, essentially guided by the interests of his people, and clearly distinguished his personality from that of the "seer" Hitler, the supreme expression of Pan-Germanist philosophy and its aspiration to world domination. At that time, even those who spoke of a "paranoid" Mussolini generally attributed his paranoia to the illness that is said to have struck him around 1939; see, in this regard, the article by J. Whitaker, "Mussolini: Turning Point in a Dictator's Career," in the *Daily Telegraph*, April 28, 1941, which we will discuss below.

His public appearances became increasingly rare, indirectly corroborating rumors about his poor health —a factor that eventually became essential to explaining Mussolini's policies to broad sectors of public opinion in democratic countries; so essential, in fact, that even those who realized that Mussolini's "about-face" had a whole series of ideological and political reasons could not resist the temptation to regard Mussolini's state of health—or, at least, his aging[7]—as the decisive factor behind it and, paradoxically, to find confirmation of this in the news... regarding the "Duce's" athletic exploits and excellent health, which were occasionally reported by the Italian press and picked up (especially on the occasion of his birthdays) by the international press. Highly indicative in this regard is an article written for the *Daily Telegraph* on April 28, 1941, by John Whitaker, an authoritative British journalist who was not a priori hostile to Mussolini but who, on the contrary, held a certain respect for him, to the point of beginning his article by noting that if the "Duce" had died before leading Italy into war, the judgment of history "might have overlooked his inconsistencies and the inherent fallacy of his critical opportunism" and instead focused on some positive aspects of his work. Whitaker wrote:

I have been able to ascertain from reliable sources—though many details are only vaguely outlined—that in the spring of 1939 Mussolini suffered a stroke that caused partial facial paralysis for several days. I know that he had to remain in bed for five weeks in the utmost secrecy at a location near Milan. He subsequently retired to a private home near Forlì, his hometown. I know that while near Forlì, he was visited by a Swiss specialist because his left eye had been affected.

This stroke occurred at the worst possible moment, both in Mussolini's personal life and in the development of Fascism. In my view, it was this stroke that led to the alliance with Germany and, ultimately, to Italy's entry into the war. It happened at a time when, for the first time, Mussolini had become aware of the devastation wrought by old age and the loneliness that surrounds those who have attained great power...

Politically, the situation two years ago was equally difficult and disconcerting. After seventeen years, Fascism had declined: there was much talk of "living like lions"; the Italians were weary. Ethiopia and Spain had drained their strength rather than forging a people of steel. Mussolini realized that Italians wanted bread, not circuses. Instead of having forged an elite, Mussolini realized that his most trusted ministers wanted illicit gains and a reduction in

7 A typical example in this regard is D. Clarke, "Hitler ought to remember that Conquerors are not at their best after 50…," in the *Daily Express*, April 17, 1939, who believed that Mussolini had begun

to make mistakes after turning fifty and, among them, in particular, that of leaving foreign policy in the hands “of a pro-German clique, at the center of which is Count Ciano,” who acted essentially only out of his own vanity.

tension. This occurred at a time when Mussolini was certain that the future of the world would soon be decided. And then he was suddenly struck down. These are the personal and political disappointments he was reflecting on while in bed.

I believe he decided to form an alliance with Hitler in order to revitalize fascism by uniting it with the younger and more violent Nazi movement. I believe the decision was based on domestic politics and ideological considerations, not on an analysis of the international situation. The dictator put fascism first, not Italy.

Mussolini believed that Hitler would be malleable, but once the alliance was concluded, he realized that he had signed with his own blood a pact as binding as Faust’s with Mephistopheles. Confident that the French and British would not attack him lightly, Mussolini believed he had averted the danger of a German invasion and secured a position of balance for himself.

Aware of the blow Mussolini had suffered and the fears and apprehensions it had caused him, Hitler and his agents dealt shrewdly with the Italian leader. They flattered him. The two revolutions were one and the same. If Hitler won the war, the present century would become “the century of Mussolini.” They told him these things, and the dictator, who was growing older and feared for the future of fascism, found them pleasing. Had it not been for the assassination attempt, I believe that Mussolini’s rustic shrewdness would have saved him. Since he was not in very good health, he had to forgo appearing in public and suspend private conversations. He lost touch with public opinion in his country and had almost no advisors other than the Germans...

If one bears in mind when it was written, some of the observations contained in the article were not trivial; what, however, distorted the entire analysis was the premise from which it proceeded. A premise that can only be understood by referring to the endless rumors that had been circulating for years in Italy and abroad regarding Mussolini’s health.

As is typical in all authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, Mussolini’s health was always shrouded in mystery (if it was discussed officially, it was only indirectly, through the dissemination of images demonstrating the “Duce’s” excellent physical condition as a pilot, skier, etc.) and gave rise to the most disparate rumors, behind which lay, more often than not, hopes and fears that were not always easy to admit. This was true both in Italy and abroad, with the sole difference that in Italy such rumors could only be whispered—and even then, one ran the risk of being labeled a spreader of false and biased news intended to disturb the country’s “serenity”— whereas abroad they were discussed not only in diplomatic circles and political forums but also in the press—which was always ready to pick up and spread any news about Mussolini’s health, both because of his notoriety and because much of the future of Fascism was tied to the life of the “Duce,” and every rumor about it made headlines. So much so that it is no exaggeration to say that this type of rumor practically accompanied Mussolini throughout the entire period he was in power. Consider that the first reports of his alleged serious illness appeared in the Spanish press in mid-January 1923. In 1939—one of the years in which such rumors were most numerous (the others being 1925–26 and 1942–43)—even though his health was actually generally good, there was first talk of a serious eye disease, for which Mussolini was said to have even traveled secretly to Zurich to see the renowned Dr. Vogt, and then even of a stroke. Generally, however, the rumors referred to either the progression of a syphilitic infection—contracted, according to some, in his

youth and, according to others, immediately after the war—or, more often, the ulcer for which he had been treated in 1925. That Mussolini was suffering from a syphilitic infection[11]

9 The news was transmitted by telegram to Rome on January 20, 1923, from the embassy in Madrid, along with a request for clarification. On the copy of the telegram, Mussolini wrote in his own hand: “I’m dying—alas—of good health! Muss.”

11 The story of Mussolini’s syphilis was exploited in every possible way, even to construct a sort of conspiracy theory against Mussolini. Police records (ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Division of General Affairs and Research [1930–31], Sect. II, Box 39 bis), it appears that in the early 1930s, a leaflet with the following text was circulated in anti-fascist circles:

“Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the Beast, for it is the number of a man. And his number is six hundred sixty-six 666 (St. John, Revelation 12:18)

a cipher alphabet used by ancient and modern peoples, in which the first nine letters are assigned the numerical values of the digits

123456789

ABCDEFGHI

and the remaining letters are assigned the tens: io 20 30 40 30 60 70 80 90 100 no 120

LMNOPQRSTUVZ

Check the sum on the side; convert the digits to letters to find the solution to the problem

Strange coincidence: 666 has another meaning applicable to the dear Beast. The treatment for the most shameful of sexually transmitted diseases—syphilis—is called the “666 cure.” Now, our great educator of the younger generations has been delighted by this charming disease since the eve of the March on Rome (undertaken to moralize Italy) and contracted it in the filthiest and cheapest brothel in Milan

4,100

3

5

2

5 30

9 90 40 20

100 80

80

40

I

9

30

9 - a belief widely held among long-time anti-fascists, who saw in it an explanation for his “madness” — must be ruled out. The autopsy and examination of the brain conducted at the Institute of Forensic Medicine of the University of Milan in 1945 by a team of physicians led by Professor Carlo Mario Cattabeni categorically ruled out the presence of pathological changes of a syphilitic nature.[12] The autopsy also significantly downplayed the severity of the alleged ulcer, which had been diagnosed in 1925 and had concerned doctors such as Arnaldo Pozzi and Cesare Frugoni in 1942–43 (who, incidentally, had not even ruled out the presence of an amoebic infection), concluding that, at the time of his death, Mussolini suffered only from “mild atrophic gastritis.” Whether it was an ulcer or gastritis (it is not necessary here to delve into the question of whether the ulcer diagnosis was incorrect or whether it was the treatment he received during the Social Republic from German doctors that caused the disease to disappear almost completely), the ailments from which Mussolini suffered were certainly, to a large extent, of psychological origin—that is, connected to his state of mind. The dates speak for themselves: Mussolini’s health underwent its two most serious crises after the Matteotti murder and when it became clear that the war was now lost for the Axis. In January 1943, Professor Pozzi had told him so in no uncertain terms:[13]

I would not want you to misunderstand me, Your Excellency. I believe that your state of mind, just as it is influenced by your ailments, can in turn either exacerbate or alleviate their severity. If we were not at war (and what a war!), if you did not see such desolation all around you...

But Mussolini must already have been aware of this, since months earlier, speaking with his son Vittorio, he had said—alluding to the constant, devastating losses suffered by the convoys supplying the troops in North Africa—“my ulcer is the convoys.”[14] And this was true even though in March 1945, during that pathetic outburst—and at the same time, a highly skillful attempt at self-justification—that was the so-called “soliloquy on Trimellone Island,” he told journalist Ivanoe Fossani that one of his two “misfortunes” had been his stomach ulcer, “which would have knocked out an ox and which often prevented me, despite my great effort of will, from mustering the necessary energy”[15].

Between mid-1936 and mid-1940, Mussolini’s health did not experience any crisis even remotely comparable to those of 1925 and 1942–1943. Yet there was undoubtedly a slow deterioration. In part, so to speak, this was normal, due to his age, and in part also to the constant, exceptional strain of the previous two years—first due to the war in Africa and then due to the very serious illness of his daughter Anna Maria. This strain, it should not be forgotten, came on top of the fact that in 1931–32 Mussolini’s health had already experienced an initial deterioration following his recovery from the crisis of 1925. Two facts confirm this. Between late October 1935 and the second half of January 1937 (as well as during much of 1939), there was frequent talk in Roman political circles of his poor health, linking it to the various stays he made during this period at the Rocca delle Camminate, which, it was said, had been recommended by his doctors for rest.[16] And that, starting in the second half of 1936, Mussolini began to be accompanied more and more often on his trips outside Rome (even very brief ones) by his regular physician, Dr. Angelo Puccinelli—something he had never done before.[17] We also

have various direct accounts of this gradual decline and its onset coinciding with the conclusion of the Ethiopian conflict, generally from people who did not see Mussolini on a regular basis and, therefore, were better able to notice changes in him.[18]

Nevertheless, the evidence available to us today does not support the view that, during the period under consideration, Mussolini's health was such as to significantly affect his personality or his political capacity; consequently, all evidence points to a significant downplaying of their impact, which must be confined to what can be considered generally normal for a man who had led a life that was anything but easy and subject to severe psychological and physical stress, but who ultimately led a very regular existence under constant medical supervision and whose crises

16 Information from Cremona, dated October 29, 1936, and January 19, 1937. It is interesting to note that these reports reignited rumors regarding an upcoming constitutional reform that would have established the office of Grand Chancellor for Mussolini and left the premiership to Galeazzo Ciano.

17 In 1936, Dr. A. Puccinelli accompanied Mussolini for a total of twelve days. In the first eight months of 1937, he accompanied him for a full forty-six days, specifically: from April 21 to 25 in Forlì and Venice; from May 23 to June 1 in Forlì; from June 14 to 19 and from June 27 to 30 in Riccione; on July 24 in Florence-Pisa-Viareggio, from July 26 to 30 in Riccione, from August 9 to 21 in Sicily, and, again in August, from the 28th to the 31st in Riccione. See ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Ordinary Correspondence (1922–43), PG/R, b. 17, file "Dr. Angelo Puccinelli."

18 Among Italians, a typical case is that of R. Cantalupo (Fu la Spagna. Ambasciata presso Franco. February–April 1937, Milan 1948, p. 55), who saw him in August 1936 after a four-year stay abroad. Far more numerous are the cases of foreigners—diplomats and, above all, journalists—who were particularly attentive to detecting any signs of decline or illness. See, for example, H. L. Matthews ("New York Times," August 20, 1939) and F. Sondern Jr. ("The American Mercury," March 1940).

were essentially linked to his mental state. For a proper understanding of Mussolini's behavior and political actions—rather than his state of health—we believe one must take into account, if anything, the deterioration of his character brought about by the Ethiopian affair. But even here, without the exaggerations to which the sources already mentioned might lead. One thing must in fact be made very clear: while the impact of this deterioration on Mussolini's personality and political abilities was greater than that of his physical decline, its impact nevertheless remained essentially marginal, limited to influencing them in such a way that, on the one hand, it made them less agile and adaptable and, on the other hand, it led to Mussolini's more intense and stubborn personal engagement with a series of issues that now seemed fundamental to him, whereas in the past he would have approached them more pragmatically. Mussolini's political choices (decisions and uncertainties) remained fundamentally rational; what changed was the emotional commitment—the "immediate force to live," to use a beautiful and evocative expression by Don Giuseppe De Luca—that he poured into them.

In the final pages of the first volume of this work,[19] while highlighting the most significant manifestations of this transformation, we discussed the new sense of security—somewhere between fatalistic and predestined—that the success achieved in Ethiopia had instilled in Mussolini. Among the various manifestations, this was probably the one that had the greatest political impact—on closer inspection, even more so than his growing love of grandeur. Although Mussolini had planned it down to the smallest detail and had defined its ultimate objectives only gradually, taking into account the evolution of the international context, the Ethiopian campaign was essentially based on the intuition that England would never go beyond limited opposition. At times, this intuition had taken on the

character of a gamble, and Mussolini was aware that he was risking everything. The resounding success ultimately achieved nevertheless had the effect of vastly increasing Mussolini's confidence and certainty in the infallibility of his "political instinct" and his intuitions, and of further heightening his voluntaristic tendencies. Even a few weeks before the end, in March 1945, this confidence and this certainty were so strong within him that they served as a sort of self-justification for his mistakes and his defeat. Speaking first with the wife of the press attaché at the German embassy to the Italian Social Republic ("I have never been wrong when following my instinct, but always when I have obeyed reason"20), then with I. Fossani ("When I've done things my own way, I've always been right. Every man has his own star. Mine is a good star, but I cannot associate it with others without neutralizing it... I have never bluffed. I have often raised my voice, but I have never blindly relied on luck. Where I lacked strength, I had political certainty"21), he would have argued that his mistakes were not his own, but rather the consequences of external interference that had prevented him from acting according to his political intuition. In the case of the war, for example, Hitler's interference, as Hitler had refused to leave him in charge of the overall political direction of the war itself. And do not think that by saying these things he was insincere, or that he was trying at the last minute to mitigate his responsibility by shifting the blame onto others. In his own way, he was absolutely sincere, just as he had been in the years between 1936 and 1940, recalling which Bastianini wrote in his memoirs[22]:

One thing alone… is certain and terrifying: that his conviction of being infallible is sincere. If it were merely a show for the public, it would be easy—despite his polemical skill—to argue with him; but he, who sought to abolish all debate within the party as well as in parliament and the government, has, along with his empire, gained the deep conviction of his own infallibility. He is certain of himself and of his star; others must simply, after that historic trial, acknowledge his right to be infallible in every circumstance, now and forever.

"Believe, obey, fight"—the command he has given to the nation is not rhetoric but sincerity. In those three words, in fact, lies the essence of his daily life: he believes in himself, obeys his inspirations, and fights to turn them into reality.

Confident in his infallibility, it is natural that Mussolini would aspire to ever greater and more ambitious goals and feel—for himself and above all for others—even more strongly than in the past the allure of voluntaristic and fideistic elements, leading him to regard them as increasingly decisive while underestimating those that were more strictly rational. Where there was faith and will, everything—or almost everything—became possible; even obstacles that seemed insurmountable proved to be surmountable. A typical example of this is the response he gave in January 1937 to Ettore Conti, who had pointed out to him the impossibility of the Italian economy continuing to sustain such a high rate of public spending and such a large deficit: "You are mistaken; Italy is rich, and the money is there—you just have to know where to find it. After all, no economic issue has ever halted the course of history."23 This aspect of his personality is crucial to understanding a significant and highly important part of his political approach. While on the one hand success had boosted his self-confidence, on the other hand it had initially and significantly altered his judgment—which, as we have seen, had until then been essentially negative—regarding Italians, leading him to believe that they were finally on the path to forming "a unity of faith and action" on which—thanks to his personal prestige and his tendency to believe that this was a defining characteristic of the modern man—he could rely completely, and that the Italians would follow his future policies with the same faith, enthusiasm, and spirit of sacrifice with which they had lived through the Ethiopian campaign.

In this psychological state—and, moreover, now certain that the problem for Fascism was no longer that of "enduring," of resisting external pressures, but, if anything, of guarding against those internal to

the regime itself that might manifest upon his passing— Mussolini's political perspective—which until then had been confined to very narrow horizons, like those of a helmsman navigating close to shore amid rocks and shallow waters—expanded immeasurably, just as his sense of security and his love of grandeur did; it reached toward the open seas, beyond the horizon, toward a future no longer immediate. "I look at things fifty years ahead." In this statement (made to Bottai a few months after the conclusion of the Ethiopian conflict[24]), which, while rooted in the depths of his personality, was also fueled, as we shall see, in his conviction that the fundamental relations between nations were about to undergo a profound change and that, therefore, it was essential for Italy to stay ahead of the curve of this change and establish in advance the most favorable conditions for facing the new reality; in this statement, as we were saying, the essence of his new perspective is summarized. And it is at the same time the key to understanding both his Caesarism and his deep irritation—an irritation that was very similar to the reaction provoked by an inconceivable offense suffered—toward everyone as soon as he realized that, contrary to his first impression, the Italians and the vast majority of Fascists—and even his own collaborators—had not changed at all; they had not "internalized the Empire into their consciousness," and instead of new, "brighter," and more "heroic" goals, they expected from him a long period of reflection, work, prosperity, and peace—in short, not the "politics of the Empire," but rather the "politics of the hearth," against which Fascism had thundered for years in every forum and to which it had attributed most of the ills of the reviled liberal "Little Italy."

A clarification is needed regarding Mussolini's Caesarism. Fascist rhetoric and propaganda compared the "Duce" countless times

to Caesar, going so far as to portray himself in his shoes. Mussolini, in turn, was certainly—like many men of his generation and background—deeply imbued with the myth of Rome and Roman culture, and he made ample use of it both to emphasize the universal character and function of the Roman-Catholic-Fascist "civilization" in contrast to the lacking deep roots and marked by narrow nationalism among other peoples, and to offer Italians a point of reference that could simultaneously serve as a source of "pride" capable of helping them overcome any inferiority complex vis-à-vis other peoples ("From here civilization was organized; from these seven hills lapped by the Tiber, the whole world then looked to Rome. How can one not be proud, not feel a surge of pride, when one considers that we were light while all around us was darkness; that we were civilization while all around us was barbarism"25), to offer a series of "pedagogical" examples regarding the collective behaviors that, in his view, determined the rise and fall of peoples; and, above all, to present a historical myth around which to attempt to bring together and unify the various national traditions and cultures, and to use it to instill a national consciousness in the masses. To trace Mussolini's Caesarism of those years back to the myth of Rome, however, would be an oversimplification. Undoubtedly, cultural motifs of this kind played a role; its driving force, however, was something else—partly connected to the "Duce's" new ideological developments during this period, and partly a matter of character. When, in October 1937, Mussolini declared[26]

Caesar? the greatest and most profound figure in history. If there is one who is inimitable, it is the Roman dictator who, with his magnificent designs, ushered in a new era for Rome and for human society.

Caesar is the perfection of power, intelligence made flesh. He is the link, the standard that remained unattainable to anyone, between heaven and earth. The reference to Romanism was entirely secondary, certainly less significant than the reference to the Spenglerian conception of the civic and political role of men of Caesar-like stature in the crisis of contemporary civilization. What Mussolini had in mind were his "magnificent plans" which—like those of Caesar—would usher in "a new era" for Italy and,

through it, for European civilization; it was the universal and therefore historical value, in the fullest sense of the term, of the work to which he now felt called.

26 See N. D'Aroma, *Mussolini segreto*, op. cit., p. 134 (italics added). Already in E. Ludwig, *Colloqui con Mussolini*, op. cit., pp. 63 ff., Mussolini had said: "I love Caesar. He alone united in himself the will of the warrior with the ingenuity of the sage. Deep down, he was a philosopher who contemplated everything sub specie aeternitatis. Yes, he loved glory, but his pride did not separate him from humanity."

Realizing the psychological and character-related implications of this vocation—this "Caesarian" mission to which Mussolini felt called—is absolutely essential for understanding the origin and exceptional intensity of many of his political choices and reactions and, more generally, the shift in attitude toward politics and its day-to-day management that various events suggest occurred in him, but which otherwise either remain incomprehensible or end up leading one to give credence to explanations based on a physical breakdown that in reality did not exist.

The area where this change appears most evident is certainly that of the day-to-day management of power. As we have already noted, immediately after the conclusion of the war in Ethiopia, Mussolini not only officially entrusted the direction of foreign policy to Galeazzo Ciano and that of colonial and corporatist policy to Lessona and Lantini, respectively, but also lost much of the interest he had previously taken in the day-to-day management of the regime's machinery. For many issues—especially those of domestic policy—that he had previously handled personally, he retained only oversight and general political coordination, leaving the rest to the care of those directly responsible and his private secretariat to a much greater extent than in the past. He retained for himself matters of a general nature, matters of actual policy direction, and the supervision of foreign policy (in reality, for a couple of years, this was more apparent than effective: consider the intervention in Spain, which, as we shall see, apart from a brief period immediately after Guadalajara, was essentially managed by Ciano, who in a sense forced Mussolini's hand). In this regard, it is significant that as early as July 30, 1936, French Ambassador De Chambrun wrote to Minister Delbos[27]:

Following his recent successes, which have considerably enhanced his prestige, Mr. Mussolini has a very marked tendency to offload governmental duties onto his immediate collaborators. He seems to prefer to focus his attention on the deep-seated organization of the regime and on the general directives of Italian policy rather than on day-to-day affairs, regardless of their importance. Thus, little by little, his figure—so often in the spotlight—begins to fade as he withdraws into his own reflections. There is renewed, veiled talk in ruling circles of a possible transformation of the government hierarchy. If these rumors are to be believed, Mr. Mussolini would become a sort of archchancellor of the new Empire, the constitutional framework of which, however, remains to be defined. Admiral Costanzo Ciano, currently president of the Chamber of Deputies, would, under this scenario, be appointed Prime Minister, while his son Galeazzo would remain head of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Considering how Mussolini had, until then, centralized everything in his own hands and personally controlled everything—spreading himself too thin across a myriad of peripheral activities and preventing those naturally responsible for them from fully exercising their abilities and feeling truly accountable—this was undoubtedly an extremely significant development that could have had very positive consequences if fifteen years of managing the state and party apparatus, entirely centered on the person of the "Duce"—had not by then rendered most people incapable of making independent decisions and assuming real responsibility, and had not accustomed them to viewing power as an end in itself or, worse, as a tool to be used primarily to strengthen their own positions with Mussolini and

relative to their colleagues. Hence the rapid emergence of a situation that was in many respects worse than the previous one and characterized, on the one hand, by a further decline in overall efficiency (with the sole exceptions of F. Guarneri's management of the Ministry of Trade and Currency until October 1939 and D. Grandi's management of the Ministry of Justice from July 1939 onward) and, on the other hand, by the emergence around Galeazzo Ciano (and, at least initially, around Starace and Buffarini-Guidi) of a new, diverse yet extremely powerful center of power that was a worse replica of the previous situation surrounding Mussolini and which—partly due to personal restlessness and a thirst for power combined with a lack of clear ideas and excessive self-confidence, partly due to dissatisfaction with the way things were going, and partly to bolster Ciano's chances of succession, often tended to overstep even Mussolini himself—that is, to radicalize or disregard his political decisions in accordance with its own views and group interests, and, at times, personal interests.

Given this situation, within less than two years, Ciano's role became absolutely central. So much so that Grandi would recall it years later as follows[28]:

Ciano was at that time—and this must not be forgotten—the de facto ruler of Italy. Palazzo Chigi had become a direct branch of Palazzo Venezia. Ciano spent most of his day receiving prefects, police chiefs, and federal officials. The General Staff had a branch office at Palazzo Chigi, an "operational" office that transmitted orders directly to the high-ranking authorities of the Armed Forces. The latter complied without objection to the orders and directives of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was increasingly and openly concentrating in his own hands a large part of the powers that Mussolini had until then jealously reserved for himself alone. Ciano was the deputy dictator. The fact that Mussolini —known for his deep distrust and at times childish jealousy toward all his collaborators without exception—not only tolerated but also openly supported this progressive centralization of the dictatorship's powers in the hands of his son-in-law, the man unanimously most hated by the nation, had by then led everyone to believe that the Dictator had already chosen his son-in-law as his successor.

concentration of the dictatorship's powers in the hands of his son-in-law—the man unanimously considered the most hated in the nation—had by then led everyone to believe that the Dictator had already chosen his son-in-law to succeed him as "Duce No. 2."

Although Mussolini's partial withdrawal from the running of the regime was obviously not made public —and formally everything continued as before—little by little, however, something began to leak out. By 1937–1938, rumors and criticism regarding the increasingly important role of Ciano and his clan had grown more numerous, and with them, the conviction that "Mussolini didn't know" began to spread more and more—that the responsibility for what was going wrong lay primarily with his collaborators, who were hiding the truth from him, deceiving him, and "betraying" him. A "bitter phrase circulating throughout Italy," noted by Bottai in his diary on January 23, 1939,[29] sums up this unease well: "Things were better when Mussolini was in charge."

Underlying Mussolini's changed attitude were certainly rational motivations, such as the conviction that the regime's position was now so solid that it no longer required his constant personal oversight of everything and—at first—the desire to test Ciano's political abilities and, at the same time, to establish him as the regime's number two and his successor.[30] Nor should we underestimate the impact that, initially, the wear and tear and exhaustion resulting from the prolonged tension of the previous two years must have had—and, perhaps, the fact that his relationship with Petacci was becoming more serious. All of these are real motivations that should not be underestimated, but they must not overshadow the loss of personal interest in the day-to-day exercise of power and, ultimately, in politics

that occurred in Mussolini during this period as a result of the broadening of his horizons from politics to history and his personal myth within it[31]: now projected into the future and confident of anticipating it with his genius, the political routine, the lived present

30 At the very outset, Ciano's rise was so intense and so far removed from the traditional modus operandi of Mussolini and the regime that it aroused perplexity even within the Fascist leadership. A typical example is what G. Bottai noted in his Diary (fol. 314 ff.) on October 27, 1936. After describing the "launch of the Ciano article" as the "most salient phenomenon of the moment" and wondering who wanted it—Ciano or Mussolini—and for what purpose, Bottai wrote: "Everyone says: to designate and impose a successor. That may be so; but, given the multifaceted nature of Mussolini's character, it is wise to consider two other possibilities: first, that he is enduring Ciano's intrusiveness, just as he endured yesterday that of Cesarino Rossi, Farinacci, Turati, Arpinati, etc., etc., with that sort of sly passivity characteristic of a genius at rest; second, that he allows himself to be discovered in order to 'set him up for the benefit of his children.'"

31 That Mussolini already considered himself a legend is demonstrated by this note he sent to his daughter Edda on November 17, 1936, along with a clipping of an article about her that appeared in a Zurich weekly: "Dear Edda, now that you've just returned, I'm sending you the enclosed clipping from the Zurich 'Weltwoche.' Little by little, you're becoming a legend! Affectionately, your dad. Mussolini" (ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence [1922–43], FP/R, file "Ciano Galeazzo and Countess," subfolder 4). The article, written by René Hesse, described Edda as "the woman"—along with Mrs. Roosevelt—"most influential in the world" and one of "the strangest and most attractive female figures of our time."

Day by day, she lost importance to him and, psychologically, his interest in her waned; she became something that could be managed, in his view, by others. His priorities shifted. On the one hand, to raise the Italians to the level of the trials and tasks that awaited them and to lay the necessary groundwork so that they could face them under the best conditions—both from the "imperial" perspective of moral and material strength, and from the perspective of the role they would have to play in ensuring the universality of the new civilization, its ability to avoid repeating the narrow-mindedness of national "civilizations." On the other hand, to leave to posterity the evidence and the lesson of his historic insight into this future. Typical in this regard are certain statements of his preserved in Ciano's diary, from Bottai's diary, and from other sources—statements that seem absurd, paradoxical, and unbelievable to us, but which he would utter—or rather, let slip—from time to time in the presence of certain people, confident that they would record them and pass them down to posterity as maxims attesting to how he had foreseen the reality of the future civilization. A future that he intended to anticipate in a work, *Europa 2000*, and which he felt, in a certain sense, he was already experiencing within himself, scrutinizing, as his genius lifted him above that daily political routine that had, until then, constituted his entire life and which, ultimately, had given him his greatest satisfactions.

Especially in the early days—before the weight of routine forced him to come to terms with reality once again—this psychological tendency of his to withdraw more and more into himself, to meditate, and to project himself into the future was so strong that more than one of those close to him, or who were better able to discern the difference between his current attitude and his previous one, became aware of it in some way. Some, focusing only on the most outward manifestations—his desire to maintain a sense of distance even in private ("It was not the man, but the statue that stood before me. A hard, stony statue"32) and his public posturing as a symbol— "An abstract, absent gaze, that of a symbol," noted Bottai[33], and De Bono, more caustically: "Now he limits himself to playing a bit part in all the antics Starace devises."[34] Lucien Romier expressed a similar view in *Le Figaro*: "In the

regime's ritual events, his mask always seems the same, but with something more tense and less present," and C. A. Lyon in the *Sunday Express*: "Mussolini is no longer the Splendid Adventurer. He is an institution, a sort of demigod. He has become more obstinate, less communicative, a little less cordial. This change is likely explained by the triumph of his policy. One must certainly consider that Mussolini is aware of having waged, with the Ethiopian campaign, one of the few wars that inflicted damage solely on the enemy" 35. Others delved deeper, leaving us with very interesting accounts that help us understand some of the most immediate reactions this change in him provoked and the atmosphere it created among certain of his collaborators. A prime example is this account by Roberto Cantalupo[36]:

I found a man very different from the one I had left four years earlier. His figure had become broad and rounded at the shoulders, his face and neck swollen, red and glistening from sunburn; his eyes were shiny and dilated, his gaze somewhat fixed, slow, and glassy, detached from the things and people before him. Where was he really?

He said things to me that flattered me, but in a very condescending manner, with a studied and conventional tone, using an "official" voice and cadence. Everything sounded false in that conversation: his words enunciated as if there were a large audience listening, the presence of Ciano—a member of his family and a minister—and even my own demeanor was false because I didn't know what to say and withdrew into silence. I was interested in observing Mussolini. The immense distance between him and me. He addressed me formally, aloof, and, despite his good will, as if unable to return to this world: he let certain words fall with extreme caution, as if they were rare pearls that might vanish upon contact with the air. Nevertheless, a considerable strength still radiated from him, along with a strange charm.

Above all, he looked at Ciano. He didn't look at me, the one he was speaking to, but at Ciano: and he looked at him with benevolence but also with a certain awkwardness, as if the young man were a master of protocol to whom he was tacitly asking whether his behavior toward the newcomer was appropriate. Ciano nodded in agreement with the leader's words with brief, respectful gestures; he offered cautious yet precise counter-comments; he interjected with a few words of stately assent; and at a certain point, he signaled to me that I could take my leave. I had the impression that some invisible agent was supposed to lower the curtain at that very moment. I told Mussolini that I was taking my leave from him as foreign minister and made my way alone to the door, deep down glad—very glad—to be leaving… Ciano caught up with me after a few minutes and, like a director who had just finished shooting a scene from his film, asked me, "What did you think of him?" I replied, "I didn't find him. I found someone else." Ciano smiled in a way that struck me as both resigned and satisfied: "You know, he's tasted great glory; he looks down on the rest of us from on high—tiny, tiny figures—and lives in a world of his own. Perhaps it's better this way; let's leave him on Mount Olympus—he'll be able to do great things. As for us, let's respect the focus of his spirit, and we'll take care of the affairs of this world." That "us" meant: me.

It was from this Olympian psychological state—even more than from the inexorable weight of routine—that Mussolini, as has been said, was jolted by the bitter realization that he had been wrong in believing the war in Ethiopia had transformed the Italians. A few months were enough to show him that there was an abyss between their aspirations and his plans. The irritation caused by this disappointment had decisive consequences for his character.

In March 1945, during the aforementioned "soliloquy" with Fossani, Mussolini reportedly described his brother's death as the second of the two misfortunes of his life[37]:

Arnaldo was an Italian of the old school: upright, intelligent, serene, humane. He was my link to the people. What he reported to me was always accurate; his advice was always spot-on. After his passing, my distrust of people grew. I have rarely held the people I've met in high regard. The human race is still too bound by animal instincts. Selfishness is the supreme law. Even so-called superior people are valuable only in the small area in which they have specialized; their other aspects are entirely negative. Among the common people, I have found the finest social virtues. The wealthiest are life's most ruthless critics, because pleasure leads to the exasperation of the senses. Those who fall into the trap of material pleasures are lost to society. The worker who fulfills his social duty with no other hope than a piece of bread and the health of his family performs an act of heroism every day.

Had his brother's death deepened Mussolini's human loneliness (affecting even his more strictly familial life, given that Arnaldo was the only person who managed to exert some influence over his wife Rachele and, therefore, to ensure that Mussolini found within his family the relaxation and serenity he lacked elsewhere[38]) and had contributed to exacerbating his psychological tendency to withdraw into himself and to have no friends (in the second half of the 1930s, the only person for whom he felt something resembling friendship and in

38 Seemingly serene and extremely orderly to outside observers, Mussolini's family life was in reality fraught with tension. Edda, recalling her childhood and youth, wrote: "The real dictator in the family, despite her delicate features, blue eyes, blond hair, and an air of innocence, was my mother. Even in my earliest memories, I see her as tenacious and unyielding." She even went so far as to claim that her father had entered politics "to spend as little time as possible at home and thus avoid my mother's jealous outbursts" (E. Ciano, *La mia testimonianza*, Milan 1975, pp. 39 and 50). In the early years, the conflicts between the two spouses were caused primarily by Rachele's jealousy. Later, after his wife and children moved to Rome, they were also caused by the children's upbringing. "In raising our children, while my father was the poetic, indulgent, affectionate figure—the one who nurtured our childhood dreams and made them come true—my mother embodied solidity: she was a practical, down-to-earth woman who ensured the stability of the family home; when necessary, she was also quick to take action to set us back on the right path" (ibid., p. 40). Once their children had grown up, however, both Mussolinis adopted an extremely reserved attitude toward them, respectful of their newfound family autonomy. Over time, Rachele, on the other hand, added to her jealousy a sort of petulant (though not always unfounded) suspiciousness and criticism toward many of her husband's collaborators and party officials in general, with the result, on the one hand, further irritating Mussolini; on the other hand, intensifying his already strong suspicion; and yet on another hand, doing nothing to break the isolation in which he lived.

(The only person in whom he placed true trust was Manlio Morgagni.) It is a fact—one we have already discussed—that he avoided socializing with anyone outside of "official" relationships, distrusted everyone, and felt surrounded by fragile and insecure associates. Yet the words spoken to Fossani are only partially true. After Arnaldo's death, his human loneliness and distrust of everyone were in fact further exacerbated following the war in Ethiopia. First came human loneliness, then distrust, when disappointment set in. And with them came loneliness tout court—partly as a natural consequence of the human loneliness, partly due to the increasing security measures implemented around him, which—by also depriving him of much of that spontaneous physical and athletic release to which he had often resorted in the past —ended up making his days increasingly monotonous, with the result, on the one hand, of causing him to withdraw ever more deeply into his inner world and, on the other hand, of making him feel increasingly dissatisfied with his situation[40] and, therefore, more critical of those he considered responsible for it, but also increasingly eager for solitude. Highly significant in

this regard is the fact that, despite all the pressure exerted on him, the standard safety measure he consistently rejected was to reduce the aircraft's flight time to the absolute minimum: he never wanted to give up flying alone in the solitude of the sky.

It is almost certainly within this human and psychological context that the beginning of his relationship with Petacci—which took place precisely during this period—must also be viewed. Until then, Mussolini had had numerous relationships with women of all social standings. As we have already mentioned, however, these had generally been casual, "quick," and short-lived affairs, without too many sentimental "frills," and which, on a personal level, meant nothing to him. So much so that there were those who described them as almost animalistic, and it was even said that, once he came to power, Mussolini

40 For the psychological burden that the security measures for his protection placed on Mussolini, see the opening of his "soliloquy" with Fossani: "Ah! I was fed up, I am fed up, I will be fed up with this constant surveillance. For years now, at every turn, I've come across a face spying on me. There are two troubles with power: having to deal with all sorts of imbeciles and being monitored even in one's private affairs. They do it for your own good, they say, but in the meantime they tear you away from yourself. It's a gilded cage" (Mussolini, XXXII, pp. 168 ff.). And, in an even more direct vein, see this outburst of his in a note to his Private Secretariat dated October 26, 1937: "Ask the PS if I'm forbidden to walk down Via Nazionale. They always make me take Via Labicana. One day I'll walk down Via Nazionale" (ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Ordinary Correspondence [1922–43], b. 278, file 500014, "Ministry of the Interior"; and, more generally, Q. Navarra, Memoirs of Mussolini's Valet, op. cit., pp. 23 ff. Regarding the security measures for Mussolini, some foreign newspapers indulged in inventing the most fantastical stories during these years, such as claims that Villa Torlonia was surrounded by multiple rows of carabinieri and police officers "shoulder to shoulder" and that Mussolini wore (even under his pajamas) a steel breastplate. See, for example, L. Farago, "Steel Ring Around Mussolini," in *Ken*, November 17, 1938.

He received a woman almost every day,[41] chosen in the most varied ways, but above all from among those (and there were many) who tried in a thousand ways to reach him directly or indirectly.[42] The longest, most stable, and most demanding[43] of these relationships had been the one with Margherita Sarfatti, though it had long since ended by the time we are discussing. There were frequent whispers about the "Duce's" amorous exploits, and various foreign newspapers reported on his affairs on several occasions, especially in connection with more sensational episodes, such as that involving Magda Fontages.[44] Overall, however, even the foreign press covered Mussolini's love life for years without attaching much importance to it, treating it essentially as a juicy curiosity rather than as something that influenced his psychological state or his politics. A typical example is what Frederic Sondern Jr. wrote as late as March 1940 in the *American Mercury*:

There has been much gossip about the Duce's love affairs, but there cannot be a woman who has influenced him. He himself has often said that a woman is like a parenthesis in a sentence; remove the parentheses, and the meaning remains the same.

Moreover, even abroad there was no shortage of newspapers that spoke of him as a man devoted entirely to work and family, with an extremely orderly personal life, impervious to the allure of extramarital affairs.

41 Mussolini was aware of these rumors and, referring to them in October 1937, he told N. D'Aroma (Mussolini segreto, op. cit., p. 134): "When it comes to women, I have just as much

experience as any healthy man who plays his part in life no more and no less than others, because if I, Mussolini, were to take on all the women they attribute to me, frankly I would have had to be, more than a man, a stud.

“I have always steered clear of the odious role of Don Juan, because such a role has always fundamentally repulsed me. The ‘homme à femme’ is almost always a fool, a parrot repeating his little lesson: a useless and monotonous being.”

Even more interesting to us is what Mussolini jokingly confessed, nearly two years later, to Luciana Frassati, the daughter of the former editor of *La Stampa*. Taking her cue from a remark by the “Duce” about the “lack of charity” in calling certain hospices “Homes for the Derelict,” she said to him with a smile: “Is that the makings of a saint speaking within you?” To which Mussolini replied: “No, certainly not, because my flesh does not allow me to be a saint. You must have heard that said.” And, in response to Frassati’s remark, “I haven’t heard anything special. Certainly, though, in this regard, you cannot be compared to Hitler,” the conversation continued, somewhere between serious and playful, as follows:

“Mussolini: It’s the only thing that tempts me… I eat nothing but…

“Frassati: Probably just vegetables.”

“Mussolini: Yes, fruit, vegetables… and not much of either. At home, I don’t think they spend more than 4 or 5 lire a day on my meals. Money doesn’t tempt me. But there’s one thing I always fall for; and I think I’ll always fall for it—as long as I can, of course—and that prevents me from being a saint.

“Frassati: You’re not the only one in this world. I’ve always wondered what value virtue has in old age.

“Mussolini: On this subject, there is a very expressive proverb in Romagna: ‘As a young man, he gives his flesh to the devil; as an old man, his bones to the Lord’” (L. Frassati, *Il destino passa per Varsavia*, Bologna 1949, p. 40).

43 His sister Edvige wrote about her: “Benito’s love for that writer was new and profound—in my opinion—because he managed to subdue the truest inclinations of his soul and mind; because, on that occasion, he also loved the feminine qualities or flaws toward which he had always remained indifferent or contemptuous before, and returned to being so afterward” (E. Mussolini, My Brother Benito, Florence 1957, p. 164).

Compared to this type of relationship, the one with Petacci represented something profoundly new. Not only because of its duration, but also because of the type of woman he chose (in 1936, Clara Petacci was twenty-four years old and could certainly be described as a beautiful woman, whereas almost all of Mussolini’s previous lovers had been, according to the expression used in his memoirs by Mussolini’s personal valet at Palazzo Venezia[45], “mature admirers,” often not even beautiful) and, above all, for the manner and intensity (especially after a serious illness from which Petacci suffered in the final months of 1940) with which Mussolini lived it. In his superficiality, G. Ciano once told Bottai that “there has been only one change, with age, in his emotional and romantic habits: he has gone from many women to a single woman, Petacci, a mistress he never acknowledged, with a Carabinieri guard at her front door—an honor and a surveillance measure at the same time”46. Aside from the fact that Mussolini had other mistresses at the same time as Petacci, Ciano’s judgment is unacceptable. The origin of the

relationship with Petacci must be sought elsewhere. On the one hand, in Mussolini's human loneliness and in the particular moment in which it occurred—namely, after the prolonged strain of the war in Ethiopia and Anna Maria's illness. And on the other hand, in the "Duce's" desire to still feel young, to counteract the incipient physical decline caused by age. That same desire drove him to always appear agile and sprightly in public and led Bottai to sadly note this reflection in his diary: "I wonder what this Leader would be like if, among the many forms of courage that no one denies him, he possessed that of maturing with dignity and serenity."47

According to the most "reliable" sources,[48] the relationship between Mussolini and Petacci began around October 1936. However, it cannot be ruled out that it should be backdated by a few months, probably to the end of June. What is important to note, however, is that the two had already known each other since

48 There is a vast body of literature on Mussolini's relationship with Petacci, often contradictory and purely sensationalist. Among the most reliable works, see F. Bandini, *Claretta: A Profile of Clara Petacci and Her Times*, Milan 1960, as well as the testimonies of L. De Vincentis, *Io son te...*, Milan 1947; G. Persichetti, *Memorias de Clara Petacci, la enamorada de Mussolini*, Madrid 1947; Z. Ritossa, "Mia 'cognata' Claretta Petacci," in *Tempo*, February 7–May 9, 1957; M. Petacci, "After Sixteen Years: A Definitive Account by Myriam Petacci on Her Sister's Tragedy," in *Oggi*, March 2–May 18, 1961; P. Donadio, "A Tragic Love Story," in *Tempo*, September 22–November 24, 1962. C. Petacci published *Il mio diario* (My Diary), Milan 1946, which, apart from a few retrospective references, covers the months of 1943 following July 25.

Time. Mussolini had been aware of Petacci's existence since 1926. Following the Gibson assassination attempt, Petacci—then fourteen years old and already in awe of him—had written him a letter of jubilation over his narrow escape:

For the second time, they have cowardly attempted to harm Your sacred person. A woman! What ignominy, what cowardice, what a disgrace! But she is a foreigner, and that is enough! Beloved Duce, why have they tried once again to take you away from our strong and steadfast love?

Duce, my greatest Duce, our life, our hope, our glory, how can there be such an impious soul who would threaten the radiant destiny of our beautiful Italy? Oh, Duce, why wasn't I there! Why couldn't I strangle that murderous woman who wounded you, divine being? Why couldn't I banish her forever from Italian soil, which has been stained by your pure blood, by your great, good, sincere blood of Romagna!

Duce, I want to repeat to you, just as I did that other most sorrowful time, that I ardently long to rest my head on your chest to hear, still alive, the beating of your great heart... Duce, my life is for you!

THE DUCE IS SAFE, LONG LIVE THE DUCE!

And a few days later, she had sent him some of her poems, no less passionate. So much so that Mussolini was curious to know who "this madwoman" was.[49] The first, chance, meeting between the two took place six years later, in April 1932. On the road between Ostia and Castelfusano, the passing of the "Duce's" car sparked such scenes of enthusiasm among the occupants of another vehicle that Mussolini had his car stop to greet them. Petacci was in the car with some family members. After this encounter, Petacci—who was already engaged at the time (she would marry in '34 only to legally separate two years later, in July '36)—was invited several times to Palazzo Venezia, and a certain

familiarity developed between Mussolini and her family members (her father was a physician—not, as has sometimes been claimed, a court physician to the Sacred Apostolic Palaces— her mother was a Persichetti), who were also discreetly assisted by his Secretariat, which arranged for her father to receive medical consultation and later recommended her brother Marcello for a position. For four years, however, the relationship between Mussolini and Petacci remained limited to an affectionate friendship, in which Mussolini took pleasure in protecting the woman, going so far—he who, apart from music, had no interest in or appreciation for the arts—as to take an interest

49 The letter and poems are preserved in ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Ordinary Correspondence (1922–1943), file 14483, "Petacci Francesco," subfile 2 "Petacci Clara," where a copy of the reply sent by the Secretariat on May 19, 1926, is also preserved: "Dear Miss, The expression of your youthful and fervent devotion, so full of innocent trust, has reached His Excellency the Head of Government, along with your verses.

"He, touched by the kindness of this young fascist, has instructed me to convey his heartfelt thanks to you. Best regards."

her work as a painter[50] and to work toward making her marriage possible (her fiancé did not meet the minimum age requirement for aviation officers). The change in their relationship occurred, as already mentioned, only in the second half of 1936; it was only then, in fact, that Mussolini decided to make Petacci his more or less stable mistress[51].

For more than a year, the relationship was known only to a very few, and no one attached any particular importance to it. In a circle as well-informed as that of the Venice Film Festival, where Vittorio Cini was a central figure, the affair was whispered about in September 1938 as a recent development, said to have begun four months earlier.[52] And when it became fairly well-known, it was primarily due to the gossip and criticism directed at Fesca because of the cinematic success of Petacci's sister, Myriam (stage name Myriam di San Servolo), and especially due to the financial dealings of her brother Marcello and the fact that, in 1939, the Petaccis built themselves an extravagant and, for the time, luxurious villa (the Camilluccia) in Monte Mario[53]. This fact took on significance for many

50 In the second half of December 1936, Petacci held a solo exhibition in Rome at the Sala dei cultori d'arte. The catalog was edited by Piero Scarpa, who wrote: "When one possesses ingenuity and sensitivity, even if the dynamic, irrepressible, and insatiable temperament of those who practice art leads to indecision and changes of direction, ultimately the value emerges, and the reward for the hardships endured is not long in coming.

"Garetta Petacci, a young woman of uncommon talent, is endowed with a highly sensitive soul; for she has succeeded, with commendable willpower, in disciplining her spiritual faculties—which were concealed by the dominant aspect of her strong-willed character—and in a short time has been able to offer clear proof that her potential far exceeds what even the greatest optimists had predicted for her.

"In fact, upon careful observation of the works exhibited here, it is easy to conclude with the highest praise for the artist, who, in this first solo exhibition, already reveals outstanding qualities of technique and interpretation. Her clear pictorial expression—free of artifice and unburdened by pretentious knowledge—reveals a sincere and quintessentially Italian artist who studies reality and reproduces it with clarity and emotional depth.

"In Garetta Petacci's paintings, the technique makes no pretense of novelty or audacity, as it is

judiciously subordinated to the subject so that the subject may manifest, through a more or less summary style of painting, all the lyricism it possesses, rather than a meticulous display of every detail strictly tied to raw realism.

“Seascapes, cityscapes, landscapes, compositions, figures, and flowers are rendered by our artist—who has traveled extensively in Italy and abroad—with passion and particular sentimentality, so that this exhibition embodies the very essence of her tormented soul, which nonetheless possesses many unveiled flashes of light and succeeds in expressing its strength and grace by creating, without losing sight of the truth, a transcendental world enveloped in an atmosphere of poetry.”

51 For her meetings with Petacci, the so-called “Cybo apartment” was prepared at Palazzo Venezia, where she would spend many hours waiting for Mussolini to join her after his audiences had ended.

53 Many, both then and later, believed that the villa was a gift from Mussolini. In reality, Mussolini played no part whatsoever in the villa’s construction. The “Duce” was never lavish with gifts toward his mistresses; with Petacci, he loosened his purse strings a bit, but to a much lesser extent than has been claimed. This can be inferred from the accounting documents of the Private Secretariat, which managed his finances and advanced all his personal expenses (periodically reimbursed by the administrator of *Il Popolo d’Italia* and, more rarely—and especially during the years of World War II—through the sale of Treasury Bond shares, in which Mussolini usually invested his assets).

To get a precise idea of the amount of Mussolini’s liquid assets, one can refer to their status as of July 25, 1943, and in particular to the statement of those assets prepared in the form of a sort of official recognition of Petacci’s “role” with Mussolini, which caused her name to circulate in ever-wider circles, gradually prompting even many strangers to turn to her for help and recommendations. That said, it should also be noted that during the period under consideration here, the relationship between Mussolini and Petacci had virtually no political implications. Discreet by nature, content and satisfied with her love, and concerned only with the infidelities that the “Duce” occasionally inflicted upon her, Petacci kept herself virtually out of political maneuvering during this period (her first intervention of this kind likely occurred toward the end of 1940, when “the Petacci household” worked to secure the appointment of Admiral A. Riccardi—Marcello’s godfather—as Undersecretary of the Navy); Mussolini, for his part, never for a moment considered her as a potential political “advisor”; and as for the Fascist leadership, it did not begin to take a genuine interest in her or consider using her for its power games until much later, when it realized that for Mussolini this was not just one of his usual, somewhat protracted affairs, but a genuine bond, and that Petacci exerted real influence over him. Suffice it to say that the shrewd and astute Buffarini-Guidi deemed it appropriate to make her acquaintance personally only at the end of 1938, through a friend of his brother’s. Nor can it be said that—especially during this period—his relationship with Petacci distracted Mussolini from his political duties and his “meditations.” On the occasion of their handover, during the Badoglio government, to his son Vittorio (ACS, Duce’s Personal Secretariat, Confidential Correspondence [1922–1943], FP/R, subfolder “Duce’s Personal Valuables”):

L. 4 31 3 0 8,3 0 (Four hundred thirty-one thousand three hundred eight and 3 0/100) in cash.

500,000.00 (Five hundred thousand). Check from the Banco di Roma, No. 43/109259.

100,000.00 (One hundred thousand). Four provisional receipts from the Bank of Italy (No. 274), the Bank of Sicily (No. 142), the Bank of Naples (No. 457), and the Credit Institute of Italian Savings

Banks (No. 10) for 25,000.00 lire (twenty-five thousand) each, relating to the subscription of 5% five-year 1948 Treasury bonds.

4,000,000.00 (four million). Forty certificates of L. 100,000.00 (one hundred thousand lire) each of the 1949 BTN with a coupon due on February 15, 1944.

1,000,000.00 (One million). Ten certificates of 100,000.00 lire (one hundred thousand) each of the 1950 BTN (1st issue) with a coupon maturing on February 15, 1944.

900,000.00 (nine hundred thousand). Nine certificates of BTN 1950 (2nd issue) worth 100,000.00 lire (one hundred thousand) each, with a coupon due on March 15, 1944.

700,000.00 (seven hundred thousand). Six certificates of 100,000.00 lire (one hundred thousand) each and two certificates of 50,000.00 lire (fifty thousand) each of the 1951 5% BTN, with a coupon due on April 15, 1944.

500,000.00 (five hundred thousand). Five certificates of 100,000.00 lire (one hundred thousand) each of the 4% BTN 1951, with a coupon due on March 15, 1944.

500,000.00 (five hundred thousand). One provisional receipt from the Bank of Italy (No. 49) for the same nominal amount subscribed in 5% five-year Treasury Bonds of 1948.

25,000.00 (twenty-five thousand). Five PNF bonds for the Casa Littoria under construction, in the amount of L. 5,000 (five thousand) each, 5% with a coupon due on October 1, 1943.

10,000.00 (Ten thousand). Provisional receipt from the Soc. An. Cooperativa Edificatrice di abitazioni per gli operai di Como (No. 4277) for the same nominal amount subscribed.

“ni,” as was widely claimed.[54] In reality, for him it was essentially a way to still feel young, to find a few moments of relaxation, and to fill his human loneliness to some extent with a relationship that was as simple, selfless, and secure as possible. This, above all, had in fact been Mussolini’s great human and psychological struggle ever since the war in Ethiopia had ended.

Although he was well aware that he had wanted the war in Ethiopia and had had to impose it on the majority of them, Mussolini had not experienced that war in solitude, but in close collaboration with his associates, in many cases placing his full trust in them. He withdrew completely into solitude afterward, when success opened up before him the vision of the future, of the “new civilization,” and made any intimacy unbearable with those who were not part of it and, therefore, did not understand him or, worse, wanted to debate it with him;55 with those who failed to realize that, from then on, what mattered above all else were character, fortitude, and willpower—in the face of which everything else had to take a back seat and lose its importance. A typical example is this outburst of his to D’Aroma in November ’37

Many Italians would like to see in me, in everything I do, nothing but pure intelligence, rare refinement, the quintessence of wit—and you are among them.

But won’t you convince yourselves that it is character that takes precedence over everything? You must convince yourselves, once and for all, that fortitude, moral courage, and unwavering will often lead—it is true—to rudeness and boorishness, as certain gossip circulating against me claims; but there are

certain difficulties, for a leader, to which the spirit often remains a stranger.

Wit is swayed by a hundred, a thousand secondary considerations and can even “fail on the spot.” Faith and character are the intangible and unchanging principles guiding my actions. The rest is less important than you think.

Two months earlier, in September, while speaking with De Begnac, he had opened up for a moment about this human condition of his:[57]

Solitude, meditation, memories. I have no friends. I know nothing of society. I take great care to avoid it. In eighteen years, I’ve worn a tailcoat perhaps twenty times, and always for “official” reasons. Once I tried going to the theater, in a box seat. I had to leave to let the actors receive the standing ovation. The

55 To Alfieri, who had asked him whether “more lively interaction with people” might not have alleviated his loneliness, Mussolini replied: “No. I acknowledge that this loneliness is sad. But I have grown accustomed to it. And I prefer it because it shields me from intimacy, in which one is never alone in drawing the boundaries between oneself and others.” See G. Bottai, *Diario*, ff. 939 ff., dated July 29, 1940.

For a time, my motorcycle was my salvation. Then Bocchini and the highway patrol equipped the presidential fleet with cars as fast as my Guzzi. I’d had a terrifying crash on the Rome-Ostia highway. I’d patched up the numerous scratches with lots of stamps. When I got home, they mistook me for a stamp collector. No, I assure you, my life is not a pleasant one. I could confide in Arnaldo. Galeazzo is close to me, but even to him, I remain the “President.” The family goes its own way. That’s how it should be. Let my children make their own way in life. It’s well known that they aren’t rolling in money. The newspaper often has to provide for their needs at my request. Bruno is making a name for himself. Vittorio is one of the people in Italy who understands cinema best. His competitors both flatter and detest him. It’s better that he has a difficult life. Romano already has a personality of his own. Anna Maria, my dearest, is the flower that escaped death. One day, while she was very ill, at an official ceremony, they gave me a doll for her—a silent companion for her sadness. I told someone to thank them. I couldn’t do it myself. There is much talk—perhaps too much—about Edda’s influence on me. It is instinctive. I love her, very much. I listen to her as I listen to everyone. But I make my decisions alone, during the night or upon waking, shortly after dawn. What torments a public figure is the inability to keep secrets from anyone. Everyone can peer into my soul. I feel, everywhere, that I am being watched. The trust of the humble sustains my courage. The flattery of courtiers fuels my disgust. But it is impossible—especially for me—to clean house behind the scenes of the news. It is easier to dismiss an official from the “ceremonial office.” Sometimes I think that my friend is the king who owes me so much, to whom fascism is so indebted.

The person who best captured this loneliness—as well as, for that matter, the entire psychological tangle in which it was embedded—was Bastianini, a simple man (without excessive ambitions) but deeply devoted to Mussolini and, precisely for this reason, attentive to his behavior and reactions with the sensitivity of someone who truly suffered because of them. This is why, despite their apparent superficiality, the pages of his memoirs dedicated to Mussolini the man are invaluable for understanding Mussolini the politician of those years as well.[58] Regarding “loneliness,” we read:[59]

Now… more than ever, he wants to be alone. At the pinnacle he has reached, the loner of hard times has returned. The heat of his imagination has ignited the psychic exaltation that possesses him, and he

has detached himself from men, with a dazzling vision of greatness in his eyes and an ever more ardent superhuman aspiration in his heart. He suffers and savors in solitude the “pleasure of energy,” and he too, like the poet from Gardone, scorns “the morbid sensitivity, the cult of pity, the gospel of renunciation, and the need to humble oneself and redeem oneself as a laughable and pitiful effeminacy of the old European soul.”

It may seem—and perhaps is—a passage of poor literature, but it accurately captures reality. And the consequences of this solitude are equally well conveyed in the other passages where Bastianini observes how this withdrawal into himself—manifesting as increasingly sparse actual interactions with his collaborators and, more generally, with the outside world (after the war in Africa, the number of audiences not required by official duty decreased considerably 60), had a significant impact on diminishing Mussolini’s taste and capacity for mediation and pushed him increasingly either to avoid making decisions or to “take risks”; and the other passages in which he outlines the kind of relationships that this withdrawal into himself ultimately established between Mussolini and his collaborators and the reactions it provoked among them[61]:

Now more than ever, guided solely by his own spirit, he is—and wishes to remain—at a distance from humanity. From the pinnacle where he stands, his mind and ambitions sweep out toward horizons invisible to the rest of us, who are content to serve some purpose in life and bear neither the marks nor the weight of a historic destiny. We often look upon him with admiration but very often with trepidation; we would like to be closer to him and would like to express to him—with the warmth of gratitude and the loyalty of the blood that many of us have shed for Italy and in his name—our thoughts, the concerns that sometimes rob us of sleep, our daily observations in contact with everyone’s lives, with the people on the street, with those men who, in his eyes, are merely a more or less cheering crowd, but whom we see as neighbors, as fathers, as sons—outdoors, at work, at home, at the movie theater. It would be so helpful to him! Even though he has turned himself into an abstraction, even though he has created—and wishes to maintain—an aura of myth around himself, how much it would benefit him to know everything about everyone—but not through the police who interrogate, the Federal agent who issues orders, or the Prefect who writes general reports filled with bureaucratic formulas. We’d like to speak to him as we once did, to tell him that this matter should be corrected, that that other one doesn’t seem timely to us, that that order is inappropriate, that that argument is fallacious, that people’s common sense rejects this, that good taste advises against that. In short, we would like to be able to speak to him, with the tone of days gone by, in the simple language of reality as it appears to us. We rarely succeed in doing so, and we almost never find him in the frame of mind of someone who takes pleasure in listening. According to a now-established protocol, we are supposed to enter his immense office at a brisk pace, greet him in the Roman manner as soon as we reach his desk, hand him the papers we’ve brought, take note of his instructions, answer his questions, retrieve the annotated papers, greet him again in the Roman manner, and leave at a run. Nevertheless, if he—or chance—gives us the opportunity, we manage to speak with him; but if the topics are unrelated to our official duties, he interrupts us and reminds us to focus purely and simply on carrying out our tasks. We do not give up; we watch for favorable moments, seize good opportunities, and speak to him, but it is not easy, and at times his anger boils over, cutting off the conversation.

A major factor contributing to this state of mind (and its consequences)—as has been noted—was the deepening of his withdrawal into himself

60 The fact that Mussolini became much less accessible after the war in Ethiopia—even to ambassadors and journalists, whom he had previously received with great frequency and generosity and who now had to settle for speaking with Ciano—was soon noted by the international press as well. See,

for example, C. J. S. S., “The Founder of the Empire,” in *The Manchester Guardian*, July 21, 1937.

the very essence of disappointment. It was then that loneliness, disappointment, offense, irritation, and distrust toward everyone became, so to speak, a political reality—a state of mind and a behavior that directly influenced his political actions. On the one hand, this manifested as a sort of genuine irritation and impatience toward those who criticized him or even merely disagreed with his assessments and decisions and sought to discuss them. On the other hand, it engendered in him a sort of resentment toward everyone—and in particular toward those who, given their social, cultural,[62] and political status and their closeness to him, should, in his view, have been all the more ready to understand and support him; and if they were not, it could only be due to small-mindedness, short-sightedness, narrow-mindedness, a lack of a sense of duty and sacrifice—a sort of moral decay that, again from his perspective, must have had a historical-social origin.

Hence the gradually increasing distrust, suspicion, and, ultimately, contempt toward so many of his collaborators—a sentiment evident in his behavior toward them and in his judgments (often exaggerated and extremely harsh[63])—which culminated in March 1940 in the drastic statement he made to Gasparini: “There are ministers who spend their nights thinking of ways to harm me during the day.” M. This behavior and these judgments clearly explain both the psychological context from which assertions such as “All things considered, in the face of such self-serving stupidity, I want to be and remain incomprehensible”[1] and the resulting attitude[66] that aroused discouragement and irritation in so many of his collaborators (along with the fears they in turn fueled) because they could no longer understand what he was concealing behind his “impenetrability,” what his true intentions were, as well as the spread and proliferation—among those who did not experience the reality of his inner circle (and especially among those who had no connection to it and received only its echoes)—of rumors about the misinformation in which his collaborators were said to have kept him and the “betrayal” that was said to surround him. From this, once again, came the strengthening within him of the conviction that a radical “moral reform” was absolutely necessary, along with hostility toward the bourgeois “spirit” and “mentality”—deemed the cause of the Italian people’s inability to “feel” their duties and their “mission”—and their tendency to take on in him not only political but also ideological characteristics, and, even a “personal matter” to which he would give precedence over everything else, devote all his energies[67], and deal with in the most uncompromising manner (recall the “powerful punches to the stomach” from his “semi-secret” speech of October 25, 1938), whatever the cost[68]. And, by contrast, the development within him of a growing populist streak that led him to consider the “common people” the true custodians of the “finest social virtues” and, therefore, the segment of the nation that, possessing a “more flexible civic conscience”[69] and being driven by an idealistic and unselfish purpose —unlike the bourgeoisie—was, more than any other, capable of understanding and following him, and which went so far as to make him feel truly at ease, content, and serene only on the rare occasions when he found himself among the people, and in particular among the peasants[70].

62 This state of mind must have played a decisive role in driving Mussolini to lose interest in high culture, to turn away from it, but also to view it with suspicion; to conceal it less and less from Starace and the crudest, most intransigent forms of fascism; and instead to give credence to cultural second-raters and certain young intellectuals of “new fascism.” The role of “protectors” of the intellectuals was thus gradually assumed by Farinacci and, above all, by Bottai, around whom the myth of the “liberal spirit” of Fascism began to take shape. According to R. Zangrandi, *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo* (op. cit.), p. 399, Bottai is said to have used this, especially during the *Primato* era, to strengthen his chances of succession.

63 G. Ciano’s diary records several of these assessments: see, for example, among the most

characteristic ones, those regarding Balbo (pp. 28, 68, 114, and 141), Grandi (pp. 236 and 254), and De Vecchi (p. 194). But Mussolini also became increasingly critical of Ciano in 1937–38; see N. D'Aroma, *Mussolini segreto*, op. cit., pp. 135, 167, and 190. In the same work, on p. 218, see the extremely harsh judgment on Buffarini-Guidi: "He is such a liar that one dares not believe even the smallest fraction of what he reports." What is interesting for understanding how, despite having no regard or trust in them, Mussolini continued to make use of certain collaborators is what he said to Ciano in October 1938 (Diary, op. cit., p. 194) regarding De Vecchi: "Perhaps what I am about to tell you will seem Mephistophelean, but it is best to proceed this way. De Vecchi has always caused a heap of trouble wherever I've put him. But it doesn't matter. On the contrary, we must encourage him so that things get even worse. Give him the impression that I approve of his actions, pave the way for him, and wait for him to take such a huge, definitive fall that he feels finished even before others do—before he does. And then, I'll have him out of my hair for good."

67 Mussolini's particular commitment to the anti-bourgeois campaign is evidenced by the way he followed it down to the smallest detail, even going so far as to intervene personally with reprimands, praise, and reports of all kinds. The following examples illustrate this point. In a handwritten note preserved in the papers of his personal secretariat (ACS, Duce's Private Secretariat, Ordinary Correspondence [1922–1943], b. 2 7 8, file 5 00014, "Min. Interior"), dated October 1936, it reads: "On Via XXIV Maggio there is a Bolognese trattoria that has a 'Menu' visibly displayed—tell the owner to remove the 'menu' and put up a 'list' or something similar."

There were numerous interventions regarding the use of "lei." On June 5, 1939, Mussolini sent this telegram to all ministries: "Despite the precise instructions already issued, the 'Lei' form of address continues to be used far too frequently: this demonstrates a lack of discipline and a lack of character. I demand that in all government agencies the 'Voi' form of address be used both in internal communications and in dealings with the public. Be advised that this peremptory order of mine must be fully observed under the responsibility of the administrators" (Archive of the Ministry of Public Education, b. 137). The following year, on February 16, 1940, after the *Gazzetta dell'Emilia* had denounced the continued use of "lei," he telegraphed the prefect of Modena: "You will receive a sufficient number of copies of an anti-'lei' magazine, which you are to distribute to those strange teachers at those middle schools who—according to what I have read in the *Gazzetta dell'Emilia*—are still incapable of shedding this senile and imbecilic foreign livery, unknown to the Roman and Italian languages until 1600" (acs, Ministry of of the Interior, Cipher Office, Outgoing Telegram, dated).

A few days earlier, on February 2, Mussolini had sent Starace, in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the MVSN, the following equally telling telegram: "This morning's parade was very good, with the Roman march performed to perfection by the forest rangers and university students.

"The officers' march was mediocre as always—you will not have them march again.

"The same parade could be repeated on February 11 in the streets of a working-class neighborhood in Rome" (ibid.).

70 P. Gentizon, *Autour de Mussolini. Banquets et discours*, in *Gazette de Lausanne*, January 3, 1938, reports that during a banquet at Palazzo Venezia hosted for the organizers of the National Textile Exhibition, Mussolini—both during and after lunch—ignored officials and industrialists and devoted himself entirely to the guests from working-class backgrounds, with a commitment and ease that were

by no means demagogic but rather the clear result of the psychological comfort their company provided him.

And it was ultimately from this that what was certainly the most negative aspect of this shift in his character from a political standpoint arose: his growing sense that it was increasingly necessary and urgent to accelerate the pace of his "mission." This stemmed from three deeply held convictions: i) that the international situation and the balance of power among nations were on the eve of radical transformations, which others failed to perceive only because they lacked his political acumen and his ability to discern the causes and signs of these changes in a series of events already unfolding; 2) that, therefore, it was necessary for Italy to be in a position to arrive at this "appointment with history" under the best possible conditions to carry out its "mission"; 3) that, once he was gone, none of his collaborators or "heirs" would possess the moral and political stature necessary to lead Italy in this historic undertaking. In short, given that without him Italy would certainly not have arrived prepared for its "appointment with history," Mussolini had only one course of action left: to accelerate to the utmost the process of moral and material preparation of the Italian people and Italy itself, so as to bring it to completion before having to hand over the reins to others. All of this, while on the one hand meant pushing the regime's totalitarianization, the fascist "cultural revolution," and autarkic policies to the absolute limit—without worrying about the negative side effects that such acceleration would inevitably entail—on the other hand also meant placing the utmost trust in his own political "instinct" and "daring" to take far greater risks than in the past: therefore, not allowing things to mature and settle, but taking them by storm, trusting in one's own intuition and in the conviction that, contrary to appearances, "for the times we are about to live through, nothing is more imminent than the impossible"71. It also meant putting oneself in the psychological mindset of someone who, not wanting to let any opportunity to strengthen one's position slip away, did not rule out at all—and indeed explicitly anticipated—the possibility of resorting to any means necessary to compensate for the material inferiority in which Italy found itself compared to the other great powers. Truly characteristic in this regard is what Mussolini had already said to Bottai on October 28, 1936:[72]

I have always said that the Ethiopian war had to be short. That is why I provided resources exceeding the commanders' requests. So that we could strike hard and fast… The next one will be a seven-week war… We can do it… We don't need to consult anyone. Imagine the surprise of the Italians the day they woke up and read this news in the papers: an Italian air squadron has bombed the British naval squadron in Malta—it is believed that a certain number of ships have been sunk… I liked Pariani's description. He told me the other day: we must prepare to wage a guerrilla war. Exactly!

71 Mussolini used this phrase in October 1939 in a conversation with Ciano regarding German-Soviet relations (see N. D'Aroma, *Mussolini segreto*, op. cit., p. 204); however, it aptly summarizes the psychological mindset with which he lived through much of this period.

Mussolini realized that this was at odds with the image of a great, moral, virtuous Italy that he had longed for and proclaimed far and wide, as well as with the importance he attributed to the honor of nations and the "civilizing" mission it entailed,[73] and, above all, that it entailed extremely grave risks—risks that could lead to a national tragedy; and deep down he took a certain pleasure in the "heroic," "dramatic," and superhuman quality it lent to his "undertaking." As for the moral contradiction, however, his "Machiavellianism" was enough to dispel any scruples and enable him to find a whole series of arguments to resolve it—from the one offered by the theory of violence developed immediately after World War I by his friend Sergio Panunzio[74] to what he probably believed he could

deduce from the “example” of Giuseppe Mazzini. It is worth noting that Mussolini had become acquainted with this author relatively late—practically during the Great War—and had subsequently largely consigned him to oblivion, but had now resumed his interest in him, spurred in part by Gentile (whom, as a thinker, he always considered a “great,” even though he criticized him on various political issues, and who brought him the volumes of the national edition of the great Genoese’s works as they were published[75]) and partly from Oriani (an author who had always been among his favorites but for whom he had just experienced a resurgence of interest[76]), from whom he must have drawn the image of a Mazzini who

73 We will return to the issue of the smell later. For the moment, it suffices to note that there is evidence to suggest that Mussolini had begun to reflect on the issue at least as early as December 1933, when he had read Lorenzo Gigli’s *Vita di Gobineau*, then recently published, and had paused at p. 85, where a passage by Gobineau was quoted regarding the role of honor “and the civilizing idea” it embodies among white peoples. See the copy of the volume in the ACS, “Mussolini Collection.”

74 First in *Il concetto della guerra giusta* (The Concept of Just War), Campobasso 1917 (in the drafting of which Mussolini must have “participated” to some extent during his stay in Ferrara) and, above all, in the influential *Diritto, Forza e Violenza. Lineamenti di una teoria della violenza* (Law, Force, and Violence: Outlines of a Theory of Violence), Bologna 1921, S. Panunzio had theorized—developing Sorel’s ideas in an idealistic and natural-law direction— the profound difference between force (essentially conservative) and violence (essentially innovative) and defended the full morality of violence when it “erupts from life and from the deepest recesses of the spirit of the world, if it is free and at the same time necessary, if it springs from history and not from caprice, if, in a word, it springs from history and in turn becomes worthy of history” (p. 56). “Law does not follow violence, nor does it qualify or determine it ethically from the outside; rather, it is violence itself: natural law cannot but be violence, and violence cannot but be law. Means and end, matter and form, body and soul coincide and become consubstantial within violence: violence is an organism, not a mechanism; it is an idea, not an abstract schema; it is history, not a conceptual abstraction” (p. 57).

76 This “resurgence” took concrete form, among other things, on June 26, 1939, in a visit of homage—similar in so many ways—for the “moral force,” for the “irresistible influence” it had exerted on the “souls” of the finest among his contemporaries, and for his moral conception of revolution (“the new society is therefore both political and religious: a reform should precede the revolution; education will be both the means and the end, for the moral personality is the first and last term of history and of life”77) and, in this specific case, for the realism and unscrupulousness with which he had managed to reconcile his moralism and his sense of honor with a continuous web of conspiracies and attacks against the enemies of Italian freedom. As for the risks, if someone—taking advantage of a moment of relaxation and “letting one’s guard down” to slip in the right question amid his monologues on the “new civilization” and on “dramatic and definitive” violence (“for only violence, carried out with precise historical and moral aims, is in harmony with evolution and is fruitful”)—and managed to confront him to some extent with his responsibilities, his peasant common sense and his confidence in his own “political instinct” seemed to regain the upper hand. His heroes and historical role models, Caesar, with his ability to “usher in a new era” for society, and Napoleon, with his “extraordinary struggle against his time, which he ultimately succeeds in subduing,” suddenly gave way to a far more modest and prosaic mentor, his father Alessandro, and he told himself he was confident in his “sense of limits,” in his ability to stop at the right moment:

The important thing is to remain within the outer circumference of the compass… My father, on long winter evenings, used to say that the art of living and acting was, for every man, not to exceed the

opening of his own compass.

I am not by nature a reckless or rash person; I always ponder and calculate my every action, because in the school of hunger I have learned to adapt.

Whatever happens, I will certainly not forget the maximum opening of my own compass and that of the country.[78]

In this state of mind, and now convinced that Italy could reach its "appointment with history" only with him, Mussolini went to the "hermitage" at Cardello, to Oriani's grave, and to his home. In the writer's library, Mussolini asked to see the manuscripts of *La lotta politica in Italia* and *La Rivolta ideale* and emphasized the importance of these two works. See "Il popolo d'Italia," June 27, 1939. Mussolini had already spoken at Cardello on April 27, 1924, at a celebration honoring Oriani, delivering a speech extolling his work and, in particular, the two books just mentioned (see Mussolini, XX, pp. 244 ff.), which was later used as the preface to the *Opera omnia*, edited by Mussolini himself and published by Cappelli.

77 See A. Oriani, *La lotta politica in Italia*, Vol. II, p. 85; see also, more generally, all pp. 81–97, which Oriani devotes to Mazzini. It cannot be ruled out that Mussolini, in addition to the "analogies" between himself and Mazzini, also drew from Oriani certain guidelines for conduct based on the opposite principle, particularly those concerning the "revolutionary's" need for hatred, "this supreme force of revolutions" (pp. 89 ff.).

As time went on, even the issue of succession became less pressing for Mussolini. While abroad the topic was discussed with increasing insistence—often laced with more or less implicit fears and hopes ("Even if Mussolini designates Ciano as his successor to carry out his policies," wrote Charles Petrie '9 in the October '38 issue of the *Quarterly Review*, "it is not certain that his wishes will necessarily be fulfilled. We have seen how it has been impossible for many dictators to continue governing their country from beyond the grave"), various names were being considered and predictions ventured,[80] while in Rome Mussolini—increasingly disappointed and dissatisfied with his "heir apparent"[81]—seemed, on the whole, to regard this issue as secondary. Either he could personally carry out his "mission" or he would not have time to do so. In the first case, he would have had time to think it over and calmly choose the right man; in the second, dealing with his succession would have been virtually pointless... Truly significant in this regard is a curt reply he gave to Ciano in April 1938, as reported by N. D'Aroma, who was present at the conversation between the two[82]:

With a look I had never seen in him in nearly twenty years, Ciano said point-blank to Mussolini:

"You are certainly aware that, during your illness, there were those who anticipated a sudden vacancy in power. If such a thing were to happen—God forbid—I don't know when, but should it happen, you will need to leave written—and please give this some thought—directives, or…—he hesitates—provisions…"

"Never," Mussolini replied categorically, staring at him with obvious resentment, "never… because I hate political wills, I detest designated heirs, and I cannot imagine that a people and a party—simply because they chose me or followed me—should then passively accept, with their eyes closed, an order from me on such a demanding, such a delicate matter. "Yes, I have already pushed too hard in the direction of discipline and orders from above."

“So what?” Ciano presses, an imperceptible tremor shaking his hands.

According to F. Owen, “March of a Dictator,” in the *Evening Standard*, January 14, 1939, Mussolini’s demise would have marked the regime’s moment of truth: “When this turbulent, brilliant, brutal genius is no more, the system he built with furious energy and no small amount of devotion will face its true test.”

80 The most frequently mentioned names, aside from G. Ciano (generally not favored by the democratic press), were those of Balbo and, above all, Grandi (the most well-regarded). Other names that were floated included Farinacci, Starace, and Bottai. In the second half of 1938, rumors spread abroad once again that the “Duce” was seriously ill, and some spoke of a situation so precarious for Italian finances that an imminent fall of Mussolini seemed likely. On that occasion, various quarters proposed a succession by the “capable, popular, and ambitious” Prince of Piedmont, either personally or with Grandi as prime minister. See, in particular, C. Petrie, “When Are Dictators Going to Fall?”, in *The Weekly Standard East London*, October 8, 1938.

“Well then,” Mussolini replied, “power will go to whoever knows how to dominate both men and affairs within the party: whoever has the skill and fortitude. Napoleon’s remark on the eve of Wagram applies to me. There are no opinions or assumptions to be expressed regarding succession; it is simply a matter of the rules of the game: whoever wins… wins!”

Having outlined the essential features of Mussolini’s character’s regression, the time has come to attempt to define the general terms of his ideological evolution. We say “general terms” because, even though the period between mid-1936 and mid-1940—and especially the first two years—was for Mussolini a time of extensive reading and solitary “meditations” that had a profound influence on his personality, his ideology, and his political actions, the documentation on this evolution is extremely scarce, and we are inevitably limited to what can be reconstructed from the very few and fragmentary sources available. The seminal text of this new ideological direction was supposed to be *Europa 2000*. In it, Mussolini was to outline the characteristics of the “new civilization” that, in his view, was about to take hold in the West and, within this framework, explain why he was convinced that the peoples who would dominate the world within a few decades would be the Germans, Italians, Russians, and Japanese. In reality, Mussolini never even began writing *Europa 2000*, and everything suggests that, however convinced he was of his ideas, he did not write it because, deep down, he was aware that he was unable to present a complete exposition of them and considered it above all an intuition of his “genius” and his “political instinct,” with respect to which a series of cultural and political influences—some of which had been present and active within him for some time, others picked up occasionally here and there (even where one would least expect it)—in an attempt precisely to give it an ideological framework, failed to coalesce into a coherent discourse and were often motivated solely by psychological factors, that is, in relation to what he considered at that moment to be the main obstacles to his political agenda. So much so that there is no evidence that he spoke about it at length even with those who, for better or worse, were closest to him, or with those—a typical example being Nino D’Aroma, whose *Il Mussolini segreto* is, precisely for this reason, a valuable source for us—to whom he was in the habit of giving directives and suggestions for their political commentary in newspapers and on the radio regarding current events and who, therefore, could have begun to circulate it.

The only two direct accounts of *Europa 2000* have been preserved for us by G. Ciano and N. D’Aroma. Ciano, in his diary, noted on September 6, 1937:[83]

The Duce lashed out against America, a country of Negroes and Jews, a disruptive element of civilization. He wants to write a book: Europe in 2000. The races that will play an important role will be the Italians, the Germans, the Russians, and the Japanese. The other peoples will be destroyed by the acid of Jewish corruption. They even refuse to have children because it causes pain. They do not know that pain is the only creative element in the life of peoples. And also in that of men.

And exactly one year later, in September 1938, D'Aroma wrote in turn:[84]

An English magazine has been published reporting that Mussolini is about to publish a book on race and demographics titled *Europa 2000*. At the end of a conversation—since he seems to want to keep me entertained—I ask about the veracity of the announcement.

Calm and ironic, he replied: "It's absolutely true: I don't know how the news leaked out. But it must have reached London via Palazzo Chigi. Sooner or later, I'll have to go to Piazza Colonna with a broom to rid that building of certain pro-British trash that Galeazzo protects.

I will write this book, yes, but to prove that in the year 2000, the peoples who will dominate the world will be only Germans, Italians, Russians, and Japanese."

Although they coincide, the two accounts show some differences. The Mussolini quoted by D'Aroma speaks only of the peoples who would dominate in the year 2000; he does not contest the "racial and demographic" argument attributed to the book he intended to write, but he does not go into details. Ciano's account, on the other hand, delves somewhat into the substance of the matter, specifying the anti-Black and anti-Semitic nature of that argument and focusing above all on the "creativity" of suffering. For us, this account is therefore the most important, especially since there is no reason not to consider it reliable. Both because there is no apparent reason for Ciano to have manipulated it, and because there is no doubt that by September 1937 Mussolini was already facing, on Italy's behalf, both the problem of preventing the spread of racial mixing and that of "defending" the country against the antifascist "hostility" of "international Jewry" and Freemasonry, which, in his view, had become apparent during the war in Ethiopia,[85] and it is understandable that he viewed both issues not only in relation to Italy at that time but—given his increasingly pronounced tendency to see all problems as manifestations of the crisis of Western civilization[86] and in light of the "mission" that Italy was to fulfill to renew that civilization—in relation to society as a whole. That said, the second part of Ciano's testimony that has been preserved and, more generally, what we know about Mussolini's "racism" nevertheless lead us to believe that the racial characterization of Mussolini's argument must be understood in a very broad and at the same time specific sense—essentially psychological and spiritual; the only sense, moreover, that allows for a discourse which—since it must apply to four peoples so racially diverse that no true racist would ever have grouped them together[87]—could otherwise have no racial characterization whatsoever.

85 Regarding the relationship between Mussolini and "international Jewry" during the Ethiopian War and the emergence in the "Duce" (probably under the influence of Aloisi and Father Tacchi Venturi: see P. Aloisi, Journal [July 25, 1932–June 14, 1936], Paris 1957, pp. 326, 330, 332, and 364)—of the conviction that "international Jewry" (from which he had sought assistance in October–November 1935 to avert sanctions) was—despite what he had done for German Jews and refugees from Central and Eastern Europe—intrinsically anti-fascist and pro-British; see R. De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, op. cit., pp. 175 ff. There is a complete lack of research on the relationship between Mussolini and Freemasonry in the 1930s. It must have been simpler, in that it was more clearly antagonistic. Nevertheless, it cannot be entirely ruled out that, in view of the Fascist campaign in

Ethiopia, cautious attempts were made to secure the neutrality of international Freemasonry. One piece of evidence supporting this view could be the approval granted for the participation of the Methodist pastor Ettore Busan in the Universal Congress of Freemasonry of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, held in Brussels in June 1935, which—albeit after very heated disputes and thanks above all to the support of American Freemasonry—recognized Busan as the sole legitimate representative of Italy. This episode is documented in a lengthy confidential report ("Italian Freemasonry: Under Fascism. After the Allied Occupation of Rome. Its Relations with the United States of America and Its Current Crisis of Reorganization [February 1945]") and the documents attached to it, drafted by Police Commissioner Giuseppe Dosi for the Allied Military Government in Italy, and is confirmed in ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Political Police Division, file "Busan Ettore," and, more generally, id., Political Police Division—Subjects, b. 138, file K59, "Freemasonry in Italy."

The central idea from which Mussolini's argument sprang was purely demographic in nature. And it was fully consistent with the line of reasoning that we have seen Mussolini develop over more than a decade through his "Ascension" speech and the preface to Korherr's book *Regression of Birth Rates, Death of Nations*, and which he had now—with the war in Ethiopia just concluded—resumed with great insistence (between May '36 and January '38, he wrote for *Il Popolo d'Italia* some fifteen articles and notes—all anonymous—on European demographic developments, particularly those in Italy, France, and England,[89] and inspired a whole series of pieces on the same topics by leading contributors to "popular culture"—which in itself demonstrates the importance he attached to the issue. The Germans, Russians, Japanese, and (despite a series of serious setbacks) the Italians were the only major civilized nations experiencing demographic growth. The others—particularly the French and British—were instead seeing their populations decline at an increasingly rapid pace and age inexorably. Within a few five-year periods, or at most two decades, this demographic trend would have overturned the balance of power, both in terms of the availability of young people in the various countries who were fit for work and military service (and their military capabilities[90]), and in terms of the "gaps in presence" that this would inevitably entail for the currently dominant nations—gaps that would just as inevitably be filled by nations rich in demographic and human potential[91].

Mussolini had absolutely no doubts whatsoever regarding this fundamental role of the demographic factor in the life and historical function of peoples. For him, the trajectory of nations was above all "a direct projection of the demographic flow that forms their lifeblood." Demographically, a nation is always in a perpetual state of combat: it can never rest on its laurels and wait for time to pass. It either advances or retreats. If it avoids the former, it plunges inexorably into the latter.[92]

In practice, as he wrote in November 1936 in *Il popolo d'Italia*, "in the long run, the excess births are the weapon of the strongest. Weapons of steel cannot delude themselves into thinking they can reap an infinite harvest, even if—by some absurdity—they were to outnumber the enemy through mechanical means. Therefore, flourishing peoples do not fear tomorrow... Fortunate are those nations that possess and safeguard the magnificent secret of this silent and invincible weapon, which is equally suited to both war and peace.

Bolstered by this conviction, Mussolini's challenge was to identify the causes of the demographic decline among nations. This was all the more pressing because, although the Italian population was still growing (thanks to high fertility rates in rural and southern areas), the pace of that growth was slowing dangerously, and the regime's demographic policy—aimed at reversing this trend—was proving

inadequate, so there was a serious danger that Italy, too, would soon join the ranks of nations in decline, and that Mussolini would thus see his efforts to make Italy a dominant nation—and even the decisive element of the "new civilization" he was certain was taking shape—thwarted.

At the end of January 1937, Mussolini published two articles in *Il popolo d'Italia* that served as a genuine wake-up call in this regard: if the

90 "It is now a proven fact that where the birth rate declines, female births outnumber male births, and thus nations gradually lose their military and warrior capabilities" (Vecchiaia, in *Il popolo d'Italia*, January 15, 1937: Mussolini, XXVIII, p. 104).

91 On December 10, 1938, in the Council of Ministers, Mussolini, speaking of France's demographic decline, said that France "in ten years will be reduced to thirty million inhabitants. We will be sixty million. And since nature abhors a vacuum, it will be we who will fill the gaps in French territory," G. Bottai, Diary, f. 618, dated December 11, 1938.

If things continued as they were, the Italian demographic crisis would soon equal and surpass that of France.

To illustrate the phenomenon threatening the very existence of the Italian people—he wrote in the second of his articles[94]—it is worth examining it in two cycles: the period from 1881 to 1924 and the period from 1924 to 1936. It was in 1881 that Italy recorded its highest birth rate, thirty-eight per thousand. From then on, the decline began—very slow, especially in the early stages, but steady. Over the course of forty-three years, the rate fell by nine per thousand. In 1924, the birth rate stood at exactly twenty-nine per thousand. By 1936, it had fallen to 22.2 per thousand. The comparison is clear. While the first decrease of 9 per thousand occurred gradually over a period of forty-three years, the second decrease of 7 per thousand took place over a span of only twelve years: the phenomenon has thus accelerated significantly and become a cause for concern. In absolute terms, the number of births fell from 1,124,000 in 1924 to just 950,000 in 1936—a decrease of 169,000 births. The ever-optimistic observer finds a sliver of consolation in the increase in marriages that occurred in 1936, but this means nothing. Even in 1934, there were 23,000 more marriages than in 1933, but they were largely childless, as evidenced by the birth rate, which continued to decline. One is led to wonder now whether the regime's demographic policy—which began with the 1926 speech and took shape in an impressive and systematic set of material and moral measures—can be considered a practical failure.

It has practically failed. For not only has the tide not been turned (and perhaps it would have been too presumptuous to hope for that!), not only has the decline not been halted, but we have seen this decline accelerate to catastrophic proportions and the birth rate fall to levels that will soon match those of France.

As recently as December 8, 1936, Mussolini had offered the explanation for Italy's demographic trend that he had been giving for years—an explanation that applied to Italy just as it did to other civilized nations:

in all areas affected by the decline of industrial and urban civilization, coffins outnumber cradles, morality decays, and the race grows senile. Italy's demographic strength still lies, and has always lain, in the countryside.[95]

Now, less than two months later, in the face of the evidence from the initial data of the latest census,

this explanation remained valid but was no longer sufficient. Industrial civilization and urbanization were certainly not a uniquely Italian (or French or English) phenomenon, yet Japan, Russia, and above all Germany exhibited demographic trends different from those of Italy (and France and England). Hence the need for Mussolini to supplement this general explanation with a more specific one that would account for the differences in demographic trends across the various

The first article, “In Our Own Home,” had been published on January 26. Also linked to the two previous ones, in a certain sense, is “Pangloss Reappears,” dated February 15, 1937.

industrialized countries—and specifically the Italian case, with its trend more similar to those of France and England than to those of Germany, Russia, and Japan.

Finding such an explanation, however, was quite difficult. A historical-political explanation was not sufficient. It might have served to explain the past—the fifty years following unification during which, according to Mussolini, the state and the various regimes that had succeeded one another in power had done everything “foolish and despicable” that could be done against the family and thus against its ability to “procreate and increase the country’s living and enduring strength” *. But it did not explain the persistence—and indeed the acceleration—of the decline in the birth rate during the Fascist period, when the state’s attitude toward the family had been completely reversed and the regime had committed itself in every way to promoting demographic growth and extolling fertility. A racial explanation was also unthinkable. Apart from the fact that Mussolini could in no way accept the idea—implicit in such an explanation—of the racial inferiority of Italians, and that his entire worldview was, so to speak, spiritualist in nature, an explanation in anthropological and biological terms applied to peoples of such diverse racial backgrounds would in fact have been absurd.

In this situation, it must have seemed to Mussolini that the only possible explanation was to attribute the Italians’ inability to behave demographically like the Germans, the Russians, and the Japanese—and their tendency instead to follow in the footsteps of the French and the British—to a particular moral factor, connected on the one hand to industrialization (and thus common to all civilized countries, and in Italy more pronounced in areas where modern industrial society and urbanization were strongest) and, on the other hand, more pronounced in Italy than in Germany, in Russia and Japan—due to the particular circumstances of our country, those of the distant past which—to quote Oriani97—had “transformed” its history “into an echo of European history” and reduced its voice to a repetition of those “of France, of Germany, Austria, and everyone’s”—and above all the more recent ones, characterized by the chronic subordination and cultural and moral passivity of the Italian bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the Franco-British bourgeois-democratic models. This subordination and cultural and moral passivity were said to manifest themselves through a selfishness that in the past had been the hallmark, the spirit of the liberal-bourgeois, “resigned” “Italietta,” tied to the politics of “staying close to home,” deaf to national and popular values, and which still influenced the attitude of so much of the bourgeoisie toward fascism. Typical in this regard is the final section of Mussolini’s aforementioned article from late January 1937 on Italy’s demographic situation. Following the cry of alarm we cited, it continued as follows:

The causes of this phenomenon are exclusively moral in nature. Economic status has nothing to do with it, for those who could raise and support broods of children present us with their mansions or luxurious apartments—deserted of children and populated by dogs and bitches—while, on the contrary, the most needy people continue to believe—by having many children—in the sanctity and eternity of life.

The phenomenon of declining birth rates is a typical manifestation of bourgeois selfishness. From this

perspective, the ranks of the bourgeoisie—bachelors, childless couples, or spouses with only one child—are extremely numerous under the Fascist regime. One need only look around!

The polemic against "bourgeois selfishness," the "infinite cowardice of the so-called upper classes of society"98, and the corrupting influence they exerted on the people was certainly not new in Mussolini's speech or writing. And to find traces of it, there is no need to go back as far as the years of his socialist militancy. Speeches such as those on the need to create a "new aristocracy of the spirit" and to counter the spread of "suicidal tendencies"—the belief that in modern society everything was now easy, "miraculously" provided for by the state and "owed" to the people, and that one should "renounce all effort to master one's destiny"99—had been equally clear manifestations of this for at least a decade. In the new climate shaped by the resounding success achieved in the Ethiopian campaign and, in particular, by the "impotence" demonstrated on that occasion by England (an "impotence" so much greater than Mussolini had anticipated that it allowed him to achieve results far greater than he had thought possible and which, therefore, took on for him a dimension and a value that was no longer political but historical 10°), this debate, however, took on new meanings with respect to the Italian, European, and global contexts. For while at the level of Italian reality it translated into an ethical and pedagogical dimension of autarkic policy—that is, the conviction that it was necessary for "the entire nation" not merely conform disciplined to autarkic requirements, but adopt an "autarkic mentality" and align all of life with it (so much so that Starace went so far as to include among the tasks of the National Institute of Fascist Culture that of determining "the

100 Typical in this sense is the highly distinctive significance he attributed to the fact that, during the Ethiopian conflict, the British fleet sent to the Mediterranean did not have the standard ammunition supplies. See G. Bastianini, *Uomini, cose, fatti*, op. cit., p. 49.

spiritual autarchy of the Nation"), and, above all, in the justification—even before the "historical" political one—of the anti-bourgeois campaign soon to be launched by the regime, at the level of European and global reality, for Mussolini it ultimately became the key to explaining both one of the problems that had been closest to his heart for several years and which now seemed decisive to him, that of the "crisis of civilization" afflicting the West, as well as the various demographic—and at this point, moral as well—trends of the different peoples experiencing this collective crisis.

The underlying causes of the crisis remained—as has been said—industrialism and, above all, as Mussolini put it, "supercapitalism" with its pernicious consequences of a "cynical and superficial modernity" that distanced man too far from nature, making him increasingly individualistic and therefore selfish and antisocial ("the individual is a destroyer, a saboteur, when he is not—as happens among certain bourgeois classes in our country—entirely antisocial") and drove him, rather than to "live," to "prosper" without truly believing in or committing to anything, while "the future belongs to believing peoples," to "non-materialistic" peoples, endowed with that "collective sense" of life "that always triumphs over individual selfishness" and which constitutes true idealism—that is, not "abstract and sentimental," but "dynamic and virile," founded on a conscious conception of life. The varying degrees of the crisis—or, if one prefers, the greater or lesser responsiveness of various peoples to it—depended, however, on historical circumstances and, above all, on factors of an essentially moral and cultural nature that Mussolini never managed to define clearly and for which, therefore, he offered—always in private—rather vague explanations until, in the second half of 1938, —he seemed to lean toward the idea of the existence of historically formed spiritual races, present even within the various Western peoples, which—much like bodies and antibodies—struggled against one another to assert themselves and prevailed depending on historical circumstances, that is, on the moral and political capacity of the spiritual elites (the "aristocracies") to educate the masses, instilling in them their values:

the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian. The former believed in heroism and struggle; the latter, in justice and peace.

Mussolini almost certainly drew the inspiration (or confirmation) for the general part of this explanation—the part concerning the existence of historically formed "spiritual" races—from certain writings by Julius Evola, as will be seen later. The part concerning the second aspect—their coexistence and struggle within various peoples—seems instead to have been drawn from *La fin des aventures* (1931) and, more generally, from what Guglielmo Ferrerò was publishing in France during those years on the French Revolution and the Napoleonic "adventure," and in particular from his portrayal of the struggle between the two "Invisible Spirits of the City," which, according to him, characterized recent European history but also had much more distant precedents.[102] The source of the inspiration (or confirmation) is, in any case, of little importance. What matters is that this explanation aligned well both with Mussolini's underlying cultural orientations and with his practical political needs, so that it became, together with the idea of the "new civilization" —characterized by the overcoming of both the now-exhausted democracy[103] and the "supercapitalism" that destroys civilization, and by the affirmation of the "heroic conception of life" advocated by "fascism"—the ideological core around which the "Duce" conceived his politics and his personal historical mission. Culturally, it fit seamlessly into his spiritualistic and voluntaristic vision of "life" and the history of peoples, and in no way contradicted his conviction that the most genuine and vital origins of Western civilization lay in the "classical spirit"—and in particular in its concrete realization by Roman civilization—and that (and here the influence of Orano and, to a certain extent, of Oriani became quite strong) Judaism and Christianity were, in relation to it, essentially foreign and ultimately corrupting elements, even though the latter, thanks to the universalism of the Roman Empire, had in turn become a universal reality and, under certain historical circumstances, had—while impoverishing and emasculating it—allowed the transmission of the classical heritage to posterity. In a certain sense, one might even say that this explanation was the missing element needed to provide a complete framework for a whole series of ideas that were very much alive in Mussolini's culture and that, during this period, came to exert an increasingly significant influence on his ideology and politics: from those of Mazzini (the spiritualistic concept of the nation and the nation as a mission) and Gioberti (the moral and civil primacy of the Italians, "the new Israel among the peoples of Europe"), which had reached him

For their alleged influence, see G. Ferrerò, *La fifi des aventures. Guerre et paix*, Paris 1931, passim; and, for a proper understanding of the struggle between the two "Invisible Genii of the City," id., *Potere*, Milan 1947 (1st ed. in America 1942, passim), and for a general overview, P. P. Portinaro, "Democracy and Dictatorship in Guglielmo Ferrerò," in *Comunità*, October 1979, pp. 271 ff.

especially as interpreted by Gentile, alongside those of Oriani ("every race has an original consciousness and way of thinking;… every people preserves the essential character of its own race; all subsequent creations will be inspired by its primitive conceptions"104) and Spengler105. Politically, then, this explanation had, at that particular moment, two very important merits for him. It allowed him to counter Nazi ideology with his own form of racism—which, taking for granted the shared membership of Italians and Germans (and not only them) "in the Indo-European group and specifically in those races that created world civilization" 106—was characterized above all by its emphasis on the spiritual and civilizational contribution represented by classical antiquity and Rome, which had not only brought this heritage to the pinnacle of systematization but had also—through its empire and moral hegemony—made it universal in the West. And it served to explain, in equally "spiritual" terms, the bourgeois and Catholic resistance to his policies, thereby giving his reaction against them not only a "justification" but also a "moral" character that allowed him to take aim, at least for the time being, at the "bourgeois spirit" but not at the bourgeoisie itself, and at "clerical meddling," but not with the

Catholic religion. This had the dual effect of allowing him to wield the anti-bourgeois and anti-Catholic weapon with the utmost flexibility and of avoiding the risk of dangerously blurring the lines between fascism and communism. This was due both to obvious reasons of domestic and international politics and to consistency with his conviction that "fascism" constituted the "third way" between capitalism and communism and thus foreshadowed the "new civilization," which would consequently establish itself gradually in all civilized countries, albeit taking on the characteristics suited to each of them ("Every nation will have * its own "fascism"—that is, a fascism suited to the particular situation of that specific people; there is not, and never will be, a fascism to be exported in standardized forms, but there is a complex of doctrines, methods, experiences, and achievements—above all, achievements—that are gradually spreading and penetrating all the states of the European community and that represent the 'new' development in the history of human civilization"107); and that the "mission" of Italian fascism was to exercise over others that "moral primacy" which

107 In the same (anonymous) article, "Europe and Fascism," published in *Il Popolo d'Italia* on October 6, 1937 (Mussolini, XXIX, pp. 1 ff.), Mussolini wrote that "Japan is not formally 'fascist,' but its anti-Bolshevik stance, the direction of its policy, and the character of its people place it among the fascist states," and he also offered a largely positive assessment of the Brazilian experience (on which see E. Caron, *O Estado Novo (1937–1945)*, Rio de Janeiro–São Paulo 1977).

Only it was capable of exercising this role as the most genuine heir and bearer of the "classical spirit" and its "universalism." This "universalism" alone could effectively spiritualize the "new civilization" that was taking shape and organize it into a "new order" that—like the Roman Empire —would truly be a community, both with respect to the peoples that composed it and with respect to other, less civilized peoples, who were nonetheless destined to grow and develop, just as had happened to those who, within the Roman Empire, had come into contact with its superior civilization.

To say that Mussolini lacked the makings of an ideologue is almost a truism. His education—as we have seen—was certainly not grounded in systematic and comprehensive studies, but rather that of a self-taught man who had formed his knowledge through a series of extensive yet haphazard readings, the result of a remarkable intellectual curiosity—one not, however, supported by a critical spirit and prone to succumbing to those influences that seemed to him to confirm, in some way, his basic convictions and serve his political projects.[108] Nor, to be fair, although he sometimes liked to present himself as an "intellectual," had he ever truly sought to assume the role of an ideologue. For years, when it came to "enduring," even his most "committed" interventions—or those presented as such—"Forza e consenso" (1923), "Preludi al Machiavelli" (1924), the preface to Korherr (1928), and the writings and speeches of 1932–34 on the "great crisis"—had been essentially political in nature. The only real exception had been *The Doctrine of Fascism*, for which, not coincidentally, he had sought Gentile's help. This does not mean, however, that—given the poverty and cultural incoherence of his post-Ethiopian War ideological "evolution" just outlined—some might wonder whether—by referring to it as an important event—we have overestimated it. In reality, such a doubt, though not entirely unfounded at first glance, must be categorically rejected. Without a clear understanding of what we have defined as the "ideological crux" around which Mussolini, during this period, conceived his moral worldview, his politics, and his personal historical mission, it is in fact impossible to truly understand his political actions or the underlying logic that linked their individual manifestations, such as

108 Regarding Mussolini's cultural background, Suvich wrote in his memoirs: "Mussolini possessed a vast, albeit fragmentary, erudition in certain historical fields. He was particularly knowledgeable about the circumstances of our Risorgimento and the subsequent period; and then, in flashes—depending on his extremely assiduous reading—various periods of ancient history—the Roman Empire—and of

world history in general. It was the kind of erudition typical of a self-taught man, but supported by sharp judgment, an immediate grasp of ideas and facts, and a formidable memory.

“His conversations on foreign policy, sociology, philosophy, and religion were always interesting and original. His views might have been mistaken—and at times they were—but—aside from theatrics intended for the crowd—he never said anything banal.”

These were all pieces of a mosaic, and the intensity of the moral commitment he poured into it—a commitment amplified by his unique character and psychological makeup, as we have outlined. Above all, it is impossible to grasp the dramatic potential of the qualitative leap represented by the shift from the logic of “endurance” to that of “daring.” A potential that must have largely eluded Mussolini himself and that, in any case, ended up causing him to lose—contrary to what he believed—more and more each day his perception of what the real “maximum opening of the compass” was, beyond which “daring”—despite his undoubted political abilities and the realism of his peasant common sense—inevitably became the precursor to catastrophe.

At this point, before drawing any conclusions from what has been said so far, it is necessary to make one thing very clear. However decisive they may be for understanding Mussolini’s personality during these years—his state of health, his physical and psychological condition, and even his ideological evolution, which was indeed the factor that had the greatest impact (especially in certain circumstances and, above all, as we shall see, during the Czechoslovak crisis)—these must always be viewed as aspects, as components of Mussolini’s politics, and not mechanically superimposed upon it, as if his politics were derived from them. The years we are examining were certainly, for Mussolini, years of regression—of severe regression—without which it is impossible to understand them or the years that followed. However, this does not mean that Mussolini’s fundamental political action did not remain essentially “political,” closely tied to domestic and international realities and—even if Mussolini would have preferred to largely ignore it—to his daily routine. Despite his new “horizons,” the “Duce” was too much of a skilled politician and realist—and too insecure—to ignore it. And even if he had wanted to, the weight of his position would have prevented him from doing so. Understanding this is fundamental. And it is precisely to make this clearer that we have chosen to begin this volume with two entirely political chapters and address the “Mussolini problem” only afterward: so that it would be clear that certain choices made by Mussolini had their own political justification (with respect to the internal logic of the regime, of fascism, and of Mussolini’s power) even apart from the “Duce’s” regression. The importance and weight of these factors were undeniable, yet complementary, and they influenced the underlying political processes—essentially in a radicalizing, though not determinative, sense. As we shall see, they never constituted the decisive factor in fundamental decisions. A typical example in this regard is Mussolini’s decision in 1940 to bring Italy into the war on Germany’s side. This does not mean, however, that Mussolini’s politics can truly be understood without always bearing in mind this regression and its impact—both in terms of the radicalization it brought about and in terms of the definition of a certain value system and a certain ideological perspective which, while never assuming decisive weight, undoubtedly influenced various individual decisions. A few concrete examples will help clarify what we mean.

Let us first consider the case of anti-Bolshevism. In the second half of the 1920s and especially in the following five years, anti-Bolshevik rhetoric had lost momentum in many sectors of fascism. Soviet planning had aroused widespread interest, particularly among the Bottai group centered around the School of Corporate Sciences in Pisa.[109] The same can be said of Soviet cinema and theater. Nor were there any shortage of voices that went so far as to warn against those who viewed the Soviet Union through the lens of the “political serial literature” of Russian émigrés or with the mindset typical of the

most die-hard conservatives, or who had argued that, thanks to Bolshevism, Russia was finally approaching modern civilization. A truly typical example (though by no means the only one of its kind) is what was written in September–December 1931 during a debate on “Rome or Moscow?” published in the pages of *Critica fascista*. The debate, launched in response to an article by S. Panunzio (“The End of a Kingdom”) aimed at combating these tendencies and arguing that there was a radical moral antithesis between “Rome and Moscow,” concluded in the name of a “very clear antithesis.” It is of great significance to us because many of the contributions reveal a truly remarkable interest in and “openness” toward the Soviet experience—so much so that in some cases they went so far as to deny the antithesis and foreshadow a rapprochement between “Rome and Moscow.” Bruno Spampanato, in particular, after having consigned the antithesis to the attic (“Rome or Moscow was a dialectical motif for our early political activity”) and replacing it with “Rome and Moscow or old Europe” (“Only two peoples… have confronted the problem of the regime, setting out toward the new democracy that will characterize our century… Capitalism has dug its own grave. In Rome and Moscow, they have more or less abruptly laid it to rest inside...”), went so far as to speak of Russian Bolshevism as the “prelude to fascism” "°. All of this, combined with the arguments put forward by Ugo Spirito in Ferrara and a whole series of other statements more or less along the same lines, clearly explains reactions such as the one repeatedly recalled by Cavallucci with his dramatic cry of alarm: “Is fascism on the path to Moscow?”

In the same vein, see also R. Bertoni, *The Triumph of Fascism in the USSR*, Rome 1934.

With the end of the war in Ethiopia, not only did this rhetoric cease entirely, but opposition to Bolshevism once again became crystal clear, returning to form one of the cornerstones of Fascist ideology and propaganda. Various explanations have been offered for this. First and foremost, the Spanish Civil War and the anti-Bolshevik character attributed to Italy’s intervention in Spain; and, to a lesser extent, the Fascist desire to put pressure on and create difficulties for the Western governments supporting the Spanish Republicans and the bourgeois parties backing the Popular Front in France. Then there was the particularly opportune moment offered to Fascism by internal events in Russia—the great trials and Stalinist purges—to reestablish its role as the savior of Western civilization from the “Asian barbarism of Bolshevism” and to undermine the sympathies for communism that had been reawakened or aroused in certain circles of dormant anti-fascists and young people by the events in Spain and by their disillusionment with Mussolini’s policies. In reality, these explanations are only partially true, even though Mussolini himself sometimes seemed to lend them credence—especially the second one—through a series of personal statements.[111] In particular, they are true, but apply only very partially to the most authentic form of fascism and to Mussolini, for whom the underlying motivation for anti-Bolshevism during this period was rather another, deriving directly from Mussolini’s idea of the “new civilization.” If fascism was to constitute the “third way,” it is clear, in fact, that there could be no room left for the interests and “sympathies” toward Soviet Bolshevism of a few years earlier. Private or monopolistic “supercapitalism” and state “supercapitalism,” bourgeois democracy, and Bolshevism were, according to this logic, only apparently different manifestations of the very same civilization that fascism sought to overcome. Speaking in Milan on November 1, 1936, Mussolini was clear on this point:[112]

"No wonder," he said, "that we are raising the banner of anti-Bolshevism today. But this is our old banner!" But we were born under this banner; we fought against this enemy and defeated it through our sacrifices and our blood. For what is called Bolshevism or communism is today—listen to me carefully—nothing more than state supercapitalism taken to its most ferocious extreme: it is therefore not a

negation of the system, but a continuation and sublimation of this system.

And behind him, all the fascist “left-wing” factions immediately lined up, from the strict adherents of Botta to the young members of the GUF. As R. Bilenchi wrote, Bolshevism had become “nothing more than one of the two politically converging extremes of the same materialist civilization.” "\ Fascism’s task was neither to polemicize against it—thereby falling, “while declaring the opposite, into the positions taken by the various democratic, liberal, capitalist, bourgeois states”—nor to mimic it, but to “be more revolutionary than Moscow” and to condemn and defeat it “by imposing on the world the proofs of a fascist revolution.” Following this logic, in response to R. Bilenchi, who wrote,[114] “We have already fought communism and reject it as a method; to the immediate, destructive violence of the old capitalist world, we oppose a gradualist approach in both its destruction and its reconstruction.” This fits into the historical process of Italy in the last century, in which the question of the proletariat has been closely linked—ever since Mazzini first raised it—to the achievement of Italian unity and power. By subordinating proletarian demands to the urgency of unity, that gradualism began which—rejecting violence for violence’s sake—set in motion that succession of ideal plans which, culminating in the Great War, led to the ideal and practical necessity of the Fascist revolution.

As a doctrine, we not only reject communism—because we have a history and a conception of the individual that differ from those of Russia—but we also take upon ourselves the grave task of overcoming communism by paving the way for a truly human civilization of labor.

Thus we, the Italian people, assume the responsibility of having initiated a revolution against super-capitalism, echoed B. Ricci, who, clarifying that fascism had to be “more revolutionary than Moscow,” stated[115]:

1.5 B. Ricci, “On the ‘More’ and the ‘Less,’” in *Critica fascista*, June 1, 1937, p. 269; as well as id., “Those Who Are Surprised,” ibid., July 15, 1937, p. 319: “Fascism is revolution, not the Vendée; it is the people, not a caste; it is work, not money.” '

In the same issue of *Critica fascista* in which the second of the two cited writings by B. Ricci appeared, there were also two articles by A. Nasti, “Orizzonte internazionale,” and by T. Napolitano, Stalin’s “Fascism,” which, despite their anti-Bolshevik tone, were so “left-leaning” that P. Gentizon drew inspiration from them to write the aforementioned article *Moscou vu de Rome*, which raised concerns at the Center for Anti-Communist Studies. For *Critica fascista*’s response to P. Gentizon’s article, see ibid., T. Napolitano, “Stalin’s ‘Fascism,’ or the USSR and Us,” October 1, 1937, pp. 396 ff. The episode is interesting because it demonstrates the enthusiasm aroused in various sectors of fascism by the hope that the “challenge” to Bolshevism would mark the beginning of a new social policy for the regime.

There are—and there must be—various ways to surpass Moscow in the sincerity, intensity, humanity, and universality of the revolution. For example:

abolishing not property—which, once severed, regrows like a lizard’s tail—but the proletariat, that is, those without property; that is, recognizing property, and with it the development of all the powers of the human personality, as an inseparable attribute of the producer;

to eliminate not individual initiative but the indefinite accumulation of private wealth;

to combat within ourselves and in civil society every remnant of anti-historical and antiquated

materialism, the true opium of the people and the true religion of the ruling class;

to progressively unite the peoples under the banner of the Empire, which is the only possible and just international;

not to consort with global capitalism, but to know how to oppose it, and to respond to it with the rally of October 2, 13—and even a staunch Bottaian like F. M. Pacces echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the profound difference between fascist anti-Bolshevism, aimed at overcoming all forms of capitalism through corporatism, and capitalist, Catholic, and Nazi anti-Bolshevism—the latter tinted only polemically with red, "but in reality, as always, red-white-black"—and driven not so much by a genuine anti-Bolshevik consciousness as by its anti-Semitism and anti-Russian sentiment and by the "old German myth" of the march toward the East."[6]

Framed in these terms, the anti-Bolshevik polemic actually constituted for Mussolini and many fascists the flip side—the ideological complement—of the anti-bourgeois stance, even though it began, for contingent reasons (precisely those generally cited to explain it), about a year earlier than the anti-bourgeois polemic; and while the latter (also for contingent reasons, especially of foreign policy) did not unfold in all its "theoretical" consistency to the point of materializing into a genuine state-level stance against democracy—as did occur, however, with the Anti-Comintern Pact for anti-Bolshevism. It is truly significant that even C. Pellizzi agreed with this approach in his "The 'Bourgeois'" and the Bourgeoisie, which, as noted, also took issue with certain excesses of the anti-bourgeois polemic. For him, too, the anti-Bolshevik polemic and the anti-bourgeois polemic—properly understood—were one and the same.

Anti-Nazi elements—anti-communism driven by "geographical necessities" and the absence of a true anti-capitalist spirit—were also present in the previously cited article by R. Bilenchi, *The Enemies of the Revolution*. In the same vein—that is, regarding the need to distinguish between various forms of anti-communism and not to reduce fascist anti-communism ("which is a revolutionary anti-communism that has been able to create for the working classes a new social state in which they have found the real and concrete sources of their moral and material elevation") to the level of conservative anti-communism—see also A. Melchiori, *Rome and Moscow*, Rome 1937, whose argument, however, lacks the authenticity found in other writings of the time, such as those just mentioned.

Fascism—he wrote[117]—aims at the disappearance of the social outcast, of the pure proletariat. It also aims at the disappearance of supercapitalism, that is, of the bourgeois tyrant. Its goal, therefore, is not to reduce but rather to extend as much as possible, on ethical and legal grounds, the economic and social phenomenon of the petty and middle bourgeoisie.

Both ideologically and politically, this fact is far from insignificant. It is certainly no coincidence that when, on the eve of the outbreak of World War II, Hitler and Stalin reached an agreement, many sincere fascists were dismayed; they felt the need to reaffirm their anti-communism and to deny that the Bolshevik regime could be considered "red fascism"[118], and in some cases went so far as to think that the Nazi "betrayal" could (or should) release Italy from the obligations it had assumed under the "Pact of Steel."

Equally not to be underestimated is the impact—both "positive" and "negative"—of the idea of the "new civilization" on attitudes toward Nazism and on Italian-German relations. In this regard as well, it would be wrong to reduce everything to foreign policy considerations and/or to the presumed substantial identity of the two regimes. Foreign policy motives were certainly the overwhelmingly

dominant and, in the final analysis, decisive factors; however, the idea of the "new civilization" also contributed to some extent (and, in our view, in a way that should not be underestimated) to their assertion and this, in turn, certainly had a significant influence on the way in which—albeit within the framework of the Axis at first and the "Pact of Steel" later—the attitude of large sectors of Fascism and of Mussolini himself toward Nazism and toward present and, above all, future relations with it—that is, at the level of "new civilization" and "new order"—was defined. And this was true even though, undoubtedly, after June 1940, certain discourses at this level—and especially those concerning the "new order"—were toned down, softened, and generally confined to the economic sphere in order to avoid overly explicit conflicts and controversies with the Germans. There is no shortage of significant evidence on this point as well. One need only consider what A. De Stefani—a moderate fascist and one who was anything but inclined to embrace utopian ideals—wrote in 1941 in the already frequently cited *Confidenze e convinzioni*:

The new European order—which is discussed, however, without the necessary clarity, perhaps to avoid untimely compromises—cannot be limited to being a new

118 See, for example, M. Rivoire, "Situazione contraddittoria," in *Critica fascista*, October 1, 1939, pp. 365 ff., in which, among other things, the author explicitly referred back to S. Panunzio's September 1931 article "La fine di un regno" to reaffirm the existence of "a profound, insurmountable antithesis between Fascism and Bolshevism."

neither an economic order nor a new constitution that would establish a minimum of European political unity. It cannot remain confined to the realm of more or less generalized and dictatorial class materialism... If the new European order is to be, as is desired, anti-plutocratic and anti-communist, the problem of a new civilization—despite the arduous task of purifying life from a climate entirely permeated by relativism and materialism—cannot fail to arise. We cannot think that our struggle against materialism—and against its doctrinal and practical antecedents and consequences—is a tactical expedient used to make the peoples led to fight against it accept an "anti-mythical" justification—which is itself mythical—with the awareness that materialism cannot be overcome either within ourselves or in the social order... The new European order will be a political reality of transcendent importance—and not merely a shift in the balance of power resulting from a different political realignment—only if it contributes to the reformation of materialistic hierarchies and to the replacement of pseudo-values with true values.

Another case that deserves close attention is that of relations with Germany. The turning point in Italian-German relations occurred in June–July 1936, when, with the Ethiopian conflict concluded, Mussolini, at Ciano's urging, came to realize that reconciliation with England would not be easy and would take a considerable amount of time; he therefore concluded that, to achieve it, it would be advisable to threaten London—and above all Paris—with the "German card," while at the same time ensuring he did not remain isolated. Until then, Mussolini had rebuffed Hitler's advances. In September of the previous year, when Hitler had let him know through Professor Guido Manacorda—who had visited him to present his Italian edition of *Faust*—that he would not participate in any sanctions against Italy, Mussolini's comment had been: "Right, so Germany will build up its gold reserves behind our backs,"[2] And again in July 1930, even as he began to adopt a different attitude toward Berlin, he told Bastianini that Hitler had to be careful not to make "missteps" and avoid provoking a new coalition against Germany.[121] How this initial attitude led to the Axis and the "Pact of Steel" will be seen in the following chapters. What is important to clarify here is that while the Italian side entered into the alliance based on considerations dictated entirely by the diplomatic maneuvering of Mussolini and Ciano—and despite the fact that the "Duce" and large sectors of the Fascist leadership had many

substantial reservations about Germany and Nazism— the allure of the “new civilization” also played a more or less conscious role in paving the way for the alliance.

Although he had respect and admiration for his people’s sense of discipline and organizational skills, Mussolini had always harbored a deep-seated hostility toward Germany, interwoven with suspicion and apprehension (not to mention outright fear) so deeply rooted that he would never abandon them—a hostility that one day led him to explain the alliance to C. Pellizzi in these terms: “The Germans are difficult friends and terrible enemies; I have chosen to have them as friends.” His attitude toward Nazism had always remained highly critical.[122] As Acerbo wrote,[123]

Mussolini had initially had little trust in or regard for the Nazi movement, questioning—and often even ridiculing—its tenets and methods, while nevertheless taking care to clarify, in every circumstance, that they had nothing in common with the principles and practices of fascism—except for the fact that, in part, they were a poor imitation of it, while for the rest they represented ideas and norms that were unacceptable to the Italian temperament, if not downright repugnant to it. And many will recall the tone of pity—sometimes indulgent, at other times sarcastic—with which he spoke of Hitler before 1935.

Nor did things change substantially after that, except that for a certain time—roughly until the outbreak of World War II and, perhaps, to some extent until the Greek campaign—the “Duce” deluded himself into thinking he could capitalize on the great and sincere political and personal admiration that Hitler harbored for him in order to keep him in check and impose his own policies on him. Bottai’s diary attests that toward the end of 1937, Mussolini reasoned in the same terms he would later express to Fossani in 1945: “Let the Germans lead the war; let me lead the politics” 124. For the rest, deep down, the “Duce” “continued to harbor an unquenchable aversion” toward the Nazi regime, which was gradually made all the more excruciating by a “torturous jealousy” of Hitler’s power and successes 125. Nor, on closer inspection, should this come as a surprise.

122 In an attempt to summarize the Mussolini-Hitler relationship, F. Suvich wrote in his memoirs: “At the root of it all lay the differences in character, mentality, and ethical-cultural background between the two protagonists: one Latin and Catholic, the other—though born in Austria—Prussian and pagan; one pragmatic and realistic, the other abstract and fanatical. This difference was also reflected in the two men’s attitudes toward one another: Mussolini did not sympathize with Hitler; at first he tried to guide him, then he opposed him, and finally he submitted to him... Hitler viewed his meeting with Mussolini as a fateful event destined to turn the world upside down, and he believed in the principle of friendship that bound him to Mussolini (I say “principle” and not “feeling,” because I do not know if Hitler was capable of feelings) and remained loyal to him even in adversity—the “Deutsche Treue” (German loyalty). Mussolini always considered Hitler an aberration, and the proclaimed principle of friendship between the two men annoyed him. I did not follow these relations closely in the years after my time at the Foreign Ministry, but I would not be surprised if Mussolini, even in his helplessness, when he had to entrust himself body and soul to the other man, had hated him.

“As for their respective regimes, their feelings differed: I do not believe Hitler had any regard for Fascism as an expression of the Italian people—of whom he had a very low opinion—but viewed it solely as an expression of Mussolini’s political ideology; Mussolini derided Hitler’s ideology, but he exploited Nazism for his own ends as long as he could, and when he became subservient to Hitler, it was not because of Hitler’s personality or the movement’s ideology, but because of the impressive and grandiose framework of military organization that had been created in Germany.

“Perhaps one could say that Hitler built the movement on ideology, while Mussolini adapted the

ideology to the needs of the movement.

“Another source of incompatibility between the two movements was Hitler’s poor opinion of the Italian people—despite his claims to the contrary; this is also evident in *Mein Kampf*. Indeed, Hitler held Mussolini in all the higher esteem precisely because he had managed to achieve what he had with a people as undisciplined, skeptical, and lacking in a sense of national solidarity as the Italian people. Although this remained in the background, it was certainly not a compliment that Mussolini could accept.

“I had in my hands—I don’t recall how it came to me—a program circulating among the Gauleiters regarding the future organization of Europe: the leadership would be in the hands of the German element, assisted on equal terms by the British and other Northern Europeans. France was also admitted to the leadership group. Italians, Iberians, Greeks, and other Mediterranean peoples were in the group of subjects. I do not know if the document was authentic, but in any case, it was indicative of the Nazis’ mentality and tendencies.”

Even setting aside his suspicion and fear of Germany and its expansionist and hegemonic ambitions, there were simply too many aspects of National Socialism that he could not accept—whether out of conviction, political expediency, or the imitative influence it exerted on certain sectors of fascism. To limit ourselves to the most important ones, we should mention the conception of the state and the party, biological racism with its corollary of the superiority of the Aryan race, and—especially in the years when the Axis took shape—the conception of the future national and international economy.

Obviously, partly out of political expediency and partly due to his distrust of everyone, Mussolini was careful—except in a few rare moments of particular irritation or carelessness—not to voice these criticisms publicly. Yet there is no shortage of evidence, both direct and indirect, to document them. Likewise, there is no shortage of evidence showing that, even after June 1940, with reckless naivety, he continued to believe that after the victory of the Tripartite Pact, certain Nazi ideas would not be destined for success, would have to be revised, and that, in any case, thanks to Italy’s superior civilization, they would not take hold in Italy.[26]

Even taking all this into account, we nevertheless find it difficult to deny—as we have already noted—that the allure of the “new civilization” did not also play an active role in paving the way for the alliance, whether consciously or not. While the differences and incompatibilities between Fascism—especially in Mussolini’s conception—and National Socialism were numerous and at times insurmountable, one thing is important:

125 G. Acerbo, *Between Two Firing Squads*, op. cit., p. 420; D. Grandi, *Diary Fragments*, November 17, 1944, “Mussolini and I,” in the D. Grandi Archive, b. 152, file 199, subfile 6, insert 2, is even more blunt: “One of the men he hated most in the world was Hitler. This seems like a paradox, and it is the plain truth.”

The two movements had two things in common: ideological—and, even more fundamentally, psychological and moral—hostility toward the “old” civilization and the “old” international order, as well as toward their most characteristic manifestations—bourgeois democracy and Bolshevism—and, along with them, the myth of a “new civilization” of which they were to be the bearers. It was no coincidence that on March 26, 1939, speaking in Rome to the “old guard” of the Squadristi, Mussolini reportedly said:[127]

The Axis is not merely an alliance between two states: it is a convergence of two revolutions that stand in stark contrast to all other conceptions of contemporary civilization. Herein lies the strength of the Axis, and herein lie the conditions for its endurance.

Faced with this shared enmity and common objectives, it was easy for the fact that there were many—and at times irreconcilable—differences at every level (of ideology, tactics, means, and the concrete realization of the "new civilization") to lose some of its weight, becoming something to keep firmly in mind but not to "overestimate," to be addressed and resolved at a later stage, after the defeat of the "old order." And this was especially true for Mussolini—partly because of his confidence in his own political skill and personal influence over Hitler, and in the superiority of the "Italian spirit," partly because of his confidence in his own "sense of limits" and political ruthlessness, and partly because of his conviction that Italy needed to move quickly and achieve certain necessary objectives while it could still benefit from his "genius" and leadership. This helps explain, on the one hand, why Mussolini allowed himself to be drawn into an alliance that he secretly feared and, deep down, did not want—and, on the other hand, why—despite the Axis and even the "Pact of Steel" and all the rhetoric about the two peoples and the two regimes marching "shoulder to shoulder" in a "rock-solid unity of spirit and purpose"— —Mussolini and the form of fascism closest to him, the one most deeply imbued with the myth of the "new civilization," did nothing or very little to eliminate the differences and incompatibilities between fascism and National Socialism; on the contrary, as far as possible, they always took care (whether explicitly or not—this, too, is of little consequence) to emphasize them and to assert the correctness of their own political positions and ideals. This also helps explain why the first concrete forms of collaboration between the apparatuses of the two regimes took place in those areas where there was actual agreement in 1928.

128 Typical in this regard are the contacts and agreements that took place in 1936–37 between the two police forces, which concerned anti-Bolshevik actions and measures against exiles, while, in this initial phase, the Italian side rejected German attempts to extend these agreements to include measures against Jews (see R. de Felice, History of the Italian Jews under Fascism, op. cit., pp. 244 ff. and 533 ff.); as well as those between the respective agencies responsible for anti-Bolshevik prevention and propaganda (ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Division of General Affairs and Research [1903–49], b. 430).

Apart from the reference to the different courses of the two revolutions contained in the speech delivered in Berlin on September 28, 1937, 129, and the forceful assertion that "every nation will have its own fascism" in the aforementioned article "Europe and Fascism" of October 6 of that same year, Mussolini refrained from publicly addressing the issue of the differences between fascism and National Socialism. Nor should this come as a surprise. It is, however, highly significant to examine certain works that were more or less directly inspired by him or, in any case, read and approved by him prior to publication—works that appeared during these years, not only in the period leading up to the alliance but also in the years following the "Pact of Steel." In these works, not only are references to Nazism minimal or even entirely absent—for example, in *The Trial of the Bourgeoisie* (edited by E. Sulis and published in April 1940), but not infrequently the discourse presented there was in sharp—albeit not explicit—contrast with Nazism and put forward a conception of fascism and the "new civilization" that had nothing in common with that of National Socialism. A typical example is the aforementioned *Rivoluzione ideale* by Edgardo Sulis, which he had written at Mussolini's explicit request ("order," as he would state in the letter in which he sent him the first copy in mid-December 1939) following a conversation with him on March 24 of the previous year; Mussolini had previously read and approved it, and, more importantly, must have found it entirely to his liking, since shortly thereafter he entrusted

Sulis with the delicate task of compiling a collection of excerpts from his writings and speeches for the volume *Mussolini contro il mito* by Demos.[130] In it, right from the first pages,131 the author clearly emphasized that the definition “Fascism equals an authoritarian and totalitarian state” should be considered “partial”:

“Other peoples,” he wrote, “have established and will establish an authoritarian and totalitarian state; but one cannot therefore speak of Fascism, even if the restorations of certain states are called ‘fascist’ to distinguish them from the Bolshevik one...” We must look at Fascism in terms of its attitude and its consciousness in the face of current civilization... We cannot defend an order that is not our own, and we have not yet established the order of the new civilization... The temporary intensification of certain characteristics of current civilization—which occurs in totalitarian regimes in general—has nothing to do with the Fascist Revolution.

Moving on to discuss the Fascist “new civilization,” Sulis devoted an entire chapter to the issue of the “new aristocracy,” presenting it as the foundation of that civilization and emphasizing that it would be an aristocracy “of the consciousness of purpose and absolutely spiritual” rather than “material, of blood”: an argument that, while on the one hand referring to the traditional aristocracy—the nobility—on the other hand also referred to the Nazi “aristocracy of blood.”[132] Finally, another chapter was devoted to the issue of “machinery and labor,” in which—as throughout the book—not the slightest mention was made of National Socialism, yet in reality it was constantly criticized.

Nor, on closer inspection, did Mussolini proceed much differently even regarding those differences and incompatibilities that political expediency compelled him to sacrifice on the altar of ever-closer relations with Germany. The most typical case is that of the concept of race.

Mussolini had never been a racist or even an anti-Semite,133 although at a certain point—to “refute” the authenticity of what Ludwig had attributed to him134 and to counter those who accused him of having become so through imitation or even due to Nazi pressure —he claimed to have been so since the years immediately following World War I and, to this end, dug up some of his articles from 1919–22 135, which in reality only demonstrate that he had shared certain clichés about Judaism that were widespread at the time and had wavered between different and conflicting interpretations of Judaism itself. So much so that during that same period, on the occasion of his first parliamentary speech—while discussing the Palestinian situation and the then-government’s policy toward it, and having criticized the pro-Jewish policy implemented by England in Palestine—he made a point of stating that his words should not be seen as “any hint of anti-Semitism that would be new in this chamber,” but merely as a political judgment.[136] Once he came to power, he had for years consistently viewed racism and anti-Semitism in political terms and condemned them. A passage from the personal message he sent to Hitler on March 31, 1933, in a futile attempt to persuade him not to persist in his struggle against the Jews, is typical in this regard:

133 To be more precise, one can say:

a) that Mussolini personally did not have—and essentially did not have even after coming to power—any genuine anti-Semitic prejudices; Jews in general were neither particularly likable nor particularly unlikable to him; he recognized in them a whole range of talents and abilities, especially in the economic and financial fields, and, in certain respects, he even had considerable respect for them as a people; certainly, he was not entirely free of certain anti-Semitic tendencies and prejudices, but these

were not decisive factors in his character and did not go beyond the minimal level common to many men of his generation and cultural background;

b) that, in any case, this underlying traditional anti-Semitism had no practical consequences for him: it did not prevent him, for example, from contributing to publications produced by Jews (such as in 1908 to Olivetti's *Pagine libere*) and from counting Jews—such as Cesare and Margherita Sarfatti and the attorney E. Jarach—among his closest friends and collaborators;

c) that, even less so, this underlying traditional anti-Semitism did not for a long time possess the "racist" character that, after 1938, the apologists for the racial campaign and Mussolini himself sought to ascribe to it;

d) that, furthermore, this underlying current of traditional anti-Semitism had no political significance—and did not acquire any until 1936–1937; the Mussolini of the "early years" and of the subsequent years leading up to the racial campaign never embraced the extreme views of Preziosi (who never exerted any real influence over him or was on familiar terms with him, and for whom, in fact, Mussolini had no sympathy, even on a personal level) or those of similar Italian and foreign leaders of extreme anti-Semitism;

and) that, above all, he harbored a certain—let us say—reverential fear of "Jewish power" in the world.

135 The most important of these articles were "The Accomplices" and "Jews, Bolshevism, and Italian Zionism," which appeared in *Il Popolo d'Italia* on June 4 and October 19, 1919 (Mussolini, XIII, pp. 168 ff. and XV, pp. 269 ff.) and, though already in a somewhat different tone, "Retaliation," also in *Il popolo d'Italia* on June 25, 1922 (Mussolini, XVIII, pp. 256 ff.); see R. de Felice, *History of the Italian Jews under Fascism*, op. cit., pp. 68 ff.

Every regime has not only the right but the duty to remove from positions of leadership those elements that are not entirely trustworthy; however, it is not necessary—and indeed may be harmful—to frame what is simply a measure for the defense and advancement of the revolution in terms of race—Semitism and Aryanism—137.

As we have already had occasion to mention, this attitude began to change only during the war in Ethiopia, when Mussolini became convinced that "international Jewry" was hostile to him and was acting from a decidedly anti-fascist perspective. Similarly, it was after the Ethiopian conflict—as we have also seen—that, concerned by the idea that forms of racial mixing were developing in the territories of the empire and outraged by the lack of "racial dignity" demonstrated by military personnel and civilians in Ethiopia, he raised the issue of instilling a "racial consciousness" in Italians. All of this took place within a framework that would, some time later, become that of the anti-bourgeois polemic and the Fascist "cultural revolution" in which that polemic was embedded. However, the theorization of fascist racism and the actual measures against Italian Jews or those living in Italy were not implemented until two years later, following a series of preparatory steps to shape public opinion marked by three main events: in April 1937, the publication of Paolo Orano's book *Gli ebrei in Italia*; the release, on July 14, 1938, of the so-called "Manifesto of Race," drafted by a group of scientists under the auspices of the Ministry of Popular Culture and with Mussolini's direct involvement,138 and which, in its ninth paragraph, titled "Jews Do Not Belong

138 In the Grand Council on October 6, 1938, Mussolini stated regarding the "manifesto": "They Do

Not Belong to the Italian Race," contained this statement: "Jews represent the only population that has never assimilated in Italy, because it is composed of non-European racial elements, absolutely distinct from the elements that gave rise to the Italians"; and, finally, the meeting of the Grand Council on October 6, 1938, which established the introduction of these very measures139.

Although the responsibilities of certain members of the Fascist leadership and of Mussolini's own inner circle must not be overlooked, there is no doubt that the responsibility for the decision to introduce state-sanctioned anti-Semitism in Italy must be attributed entirely to Mussolini. In summary, it can be said that the primary cause of Mussolini's decision—primary, let it be clear, in chronological order, certainly not in terms of importance—is to be found in certain anti-Fascist and anti-Italian stances taken by individual Jews and foreign Jewish organizations during the war in Ethiopia and, later, the Spanish Civil War. In the situation of moral isolation in which Italy found itself during those years, Mussolini (and here it would be interesting to determine under what influences) was led to generalize these stances and to believe that the "Jewish International," allied with the enemies of fascism, had gone to war against him. The failure of the steps taken by some Italian Jews—as mentioned—during the Ethiopian crisis in Geneva, Paris, and London to avert sanctions must have reinforced this conviction, which was further confirmed —and this brings us to the second cause—by the fact that, almost simultaneously, certain Italian Jewish industrialists and businessmen, who until then had been supportive of or at least not hostile to his policies, began to hesitate and level more or less veiled criticisms at them, particularly regarding their economic consequences. It is certainly not without significance that, speaking with Y. De Begnac in 1941, he reportedly told him: "I became aware of Jewish hostility toward fascism when, in the economic sphere, our emergency policy began to take effect" 140. Nor should one underestimate an episode—in itself almost insignificant—but which, in Mussolini's eyes, must have taken on symbolic significance, so much so that he referred to it in the Grand Council on October 6, 1938, as further proof of the necessity of the measures under discussion 141: the arrest in Florence in April of that year of Giacomo Lumbroso for distributing leaflets signed by "a group of fighters and veteran Fascists" opposing the Anschluss and Hitler's impending visit to Italy. That an old squadrist like Lumbroso could go so far must have been, for him, yet another proof of how the "Jewish spirit" was eroding all "national values." The weight of these reasons, however, was certainly no less than that represented by the conviction taking shape within him (also spurred by them) —as we have seen—that the spirit of the "Judeo-Christian race" (of which the Jews were said to be the quintessence, due to their greater cohesion and racial purity as well as their supranational ties) represented the "spiritual" antithesis that stood in the way of the full flowering of positive Greco-Roman values among Italians and that kept the bourgeois "mentality" alive. Nevertheless, the decisive factor—the one that must have caused all these underlying causes to coalesce and led Mussolini to embark on the path of state anti-Semitism—was something else. It was the new direction taken by Italian-German relations.

"I, who, practically speaking, dictated it," G. Bottai, Diary, f. 6n. As far as we know, in reality Mussolini had to intervene primarily on the text drafted by the scientists.

By the time these relations had reached the point they had in 1938, the anti-Semitic choice was practically inevitable. "For practical reasons," given that the ever-increasing number of relations at all levels between Italy and Germany made it more unacceptable by the day that convinced anti-Semites and persecutors of Jews—as well as Italians of the Jewish faith—could sit at the same table as representatives of the two German countries. For political reasons, given that the divergence in Jewish policy characterizing the two regimes constituted such a jarring point of contrast that it robbed the Axis

of much of the credibility that Mussolini, on the other hand, wanted it to have both abroad and at home. Nor can it be ruled out that, at that particular moment, this served Mussolini's purpose of offering Hitler a "pledge"—one that, in his eyes, was not too binding but held great significance for the Führer—while he still refused to enter into with him that formal alliance which the Germans were demanding so insistently and which he was still reluctant to sign in 1942. What must, however, be ruled out with a high degree of probability is that the Germans influenced Mussolini's decision through an explicit request. In 1938, the "Duce" would not have tolerated direct intervention of this kind by Hitler, nor would Hitler have attempted it. Nor, for that matter, has any document or testimony to date indicated that he rejoined the party in 1930 or that he had converted to Catholicism at the time of his marriage to a noblewoman (which explains Father Tacchi Venturi's advocacy on his behalf both before and after his five-year sentence of internal exile).

Today, there is not the slightest reason to suspect such direct intervention; on the contrary, there is a specific note to the contrary by Ciano: on December 3, 1937 (that is, when preparations for the measures had already begun), he wrote in his diary: "The Jews are bombarding me with anonymous, slanderous accusations, claiming that I promised Hitler their persecution. False. The Germans have never spoken to us about this subject"141.

However, even if it was a necessary step, Mussolini wanted the anti-Semitic decision not to be reduced to a more or less slavish adoption of Nazi racist ideology and the related legislation. Many reasons stood in the way of such a solution—concerns about prestige, domestic politics, Italy's image in the world, and so on. All of these are true and valid, but they must not obscure another reason which—in our view—was equally important and, ultimately, encapsulated them all: that of emphasizing, despite everything, the difference between Fascism and Nazism, safeguarding the ideological autonomy of the former from the latter, and aligning with its "spiritualist" vision of the "new civilization."

In his search for this "coherence," Mussolini would come to realize in the summer of 1941 that the position most in line with his conception and his political aims was the one set forth by Julius Evola in his *Sintesi di dottrina della razza* (*Synthesis of the Doctrine of Race*), published a few months earlier and which he had read "between August 25 and 29, 1941, in Germany."144 Evola was a peculiar sort of intellectual and fascist, virtually unknown to most people at the time, who had begun his journalistic career in *Lo Stato democratico*, published by Colonna di Cesarò's *Democrazia sociale*, and had later contributed to *Critica fascista*, where his articles provoked strong reactions from the *Osservatore Romano* and the Catholic and moderate fascist press for having advocated the thesis of a revolutionary fascism and, in this context, raised the issue of the incompatibility between fascism and Christianity,[145] and had finally joined—thanks to the good offices of G. Preziosi— Farinacci's *Il regime fascista*, for which he had edited a regular cultural column titled *Diorama filosofico* since 1934. Evola's perhaps most significant work up to that point had been *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934); while Evola was beginning to gain some recognition at the time, it was primarily due to *The Myth of Blood*, published in 1937, in which, however, he had limited himself to expounding the main racist theories from Romanticism to Nazism. It was not until four years later that he set forth his personal doctrine, specifically in *Synthesis of the Doctrine of Race*, contrasting the exclusively biological and anthropological conception of racism with that of the "inner race" and the "race of the spirit," and, from this perspective, elevating the "Aryan-Roman" race as a "central and guiding race," going so far as to speak of a race "—both new and ancient at the same time—that could well be called the race of the Fascist man or the race of Mussolini's man."

144 This note is written in Mussolini's own hand on the copy of the book read by the "Duce." The copy contains various marks and underlinings also in Mussolini's own hand. Among the most important:

p. 82: “It is necessary to keep alive the spiritual tension, the superior fire, the inner formative soul, which originally elevated that matter to that specific form, translating a race of the spirit into a corresponding race of the soul and body.”

p. 96 (underlined forcefully): “a dynamic, rather than static, theory of race and heredity.”

p. 100: “the elevation of relatively inferior races through various cycles of heredity.”

p. 125 (underlined in red): “An idea, provided it acts with sufficient intensity and continuity within a given historical climate and a given community, eventually gives rise to a ‘race of the soul’ and, as the action persists, brings about the emergence in the generations that immediately follow of a new common physical type, to be considered, from a certain point of view, as a new race.”

145 The book *Imperialismo pagano* (Todi-Rome, 1928) was inspired by articles in *Critica fascista*, in which Evola argued that if fascism was truly the “will to empire,” it had to return to the pagan tradition, and the Church had to be stripped of its power and subordinated to the state.

Mussolini (who was already familiar with some of Evola’s theses, which he had been expounding since 1935, and who had even, on some occasions, expressed his approval to the magazines and newspapers that had published them), after reading *Sintesi di dottrina della razza*, wanted to meet its author. Here is how Evola recounted the meeting in his memoirs[147]:

Having read the book, he sent for me and praised it even beyond its true value, telling me that this was precisely the kind of doctrine he needed. It provided him with a way to address issues analogous to those faced by Germany, and thus to “align himself,” while maintaining an independent stance and emphasizing that spiritual orientation—that primacy of the spirit—which lay outside the scope of much of German racism. In particular, the theory of the Aryan-Roman race and the corresponding myth could complement the Roman ideal generally proposed by Fascism, as well as provide a foundation for Mussolini’s intention to rectify and elevate, through his state, the average Italian type and to forge from it a new man.

However, even when the anti-Semitic policy was first launched in the summer of 1938, Mussolini had sought to distinguish himself from the Nazis both through the “moderation” of the measures adopted against the Jews148 and, above all, by striving to distance himself from them as much as possible by giving fascist racism a “spiritual” rather than a biological character. In this regard, the satisfaction with which he welcomed the first editorial that *Critica fascista* devoted to the new Fascist Race Policy149 is telling. In it[150]—unlike other commentaries of those days—the discussion was in fact entirely framed in terms of the “moral unity” and “national education” pursued by Fascism; it praised the fact that the “Manifesto of Race” had not ventured into philosophical and religious territory, and it sought to offer an interpretation different from that adopted—out of moral or political insensitivity, out of conformism or pro-German zeal—arguing that the declared absence of philosophical or religious intentions—while clearly and bindingly marking the guidelines, limits, and realistic balance of the Italian racial conception, in harmony with the essential motifs of Caesarian and Christian Romanity—must not, however, lead to an interpretation or, worse, a narrowly materialistic elaboration of the declaration. The foundations of Italian racism, in fact, are and must be eminently spiritual, even if it appropriately starts from purely biological “data.”

Having reached this point, our discussion could now draw to a close. A few further considerations are, however, still necessary. It is evident that, in addition to a great deal of cultural confusion and presumption, at the core of Mussolini's ideological-political stance lay a great deal of wishful thinking and, above all, a tendency—as well as a reliance on myth—to live from day to day; and as the difficulties and contradictions of his policies came to the surface, a growing sense of having to come to terms with a political reality far more complex and far more difficult to master than any he had faced before.[151] What we wish to highlight, however, is the quintessential contradiction that lay at its heart. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the "new civilization" was just around the corner, could Mussolini truly believe he could lead Italy to its "appointment with history"? And that he alone could lead it there, within a relatively short period of time? The question is a substantial one. Even if they failed, even if they were "purely great destroyers," it is difficult to deny that some men were great. Recently, following in Fest's footsteps, Haffner and other scholars have discussed this issue even in relation to Hitler. The place Mussolini occupies in contemporary European history—at a moment that proved decisive for the entire world, and not only in relation to the moral and political issues then on the table—justifies raising the question in his case as well. It justifies—even for those who reject the ideology that drove him and the goals he set for himself—asking whether he truly believed in them and in the possibility of achieving them, or whether he was merely an adventurer who —caught in the trap of his own making—tried to scrape by resorting to every possible expedient and striving to hide his own impotence from himself and others behind a cloud of rhetoric in which not even he believed. If the first question is fundamental, the second—which follows from it—is, as can be seen, decisive for a complete historical judgment, not only—and, ultimately, not so much—on the politician, but on the man tout court.

149 "Alfieri tells me that he liked the editorial in 'C. F.' on the issue of race. The purely deterministic and materialistic explanation of 'race' is tempered and balanced by the historical concept of civilization. I find Mussolini very calm, determined not to let himself be carried away by the zealots" (G. Bottai, Diary, ff. 580 ff., dated August 5, 1938).

150 "Fascist Critique," "Fascist Race Policy," in *Critica fascista*, August 1, 1938, pp. 290 ff. In subsequent issues, Bottai's journal frequently returned to the topic of racism, seeking to reaffirm the arguments set forth in the first editorial (see, for example, Critica Fascista, "Fascist Racism," September 1, 1938, pp. 322 ff.; B. Ricci, "Codreanu," December 15, 1938, p. 62; G. A. Longo, "The 'Essence' of Fascist Racism," October 1, 1939, pp. 367 ff.), but also publishing, with increasing frequency, articles that were not based on spiritualist principles and even aligned with German racism.

151 On March 8, 1940, G. Bottai noted in his Diary (f. 790): "Rumors and reports are mounting regarding Mussolini's 'confusion.' I always see him as lucid and sound in his judgment; merely melancholic in the face of a game far more complex than the Abyssinian or Spanish ones, where a genius's intuition alone would suffice to win it."

To try to answer this, it is helpful to ask ourselves a few questions. First and foremost, what did Mussolini believe he needed to do to lead Italy to its "appointment with history"? Although we are well aware that these were interrelated and interdependent issues, for the sake of clarity—and given that we have already discussed the various aspects of the matter at length in previous chapters or will discuss them in the coming ones and at the beginning of the final volume of this biography—we will here divide the issue itself into two broad categories: one pertaining more specifically to domestic policy and the other to foreign policy.

Domestically, what Mussolini considered essential was: 1) to educate Italians—and especially the youth—in the Fascist spirit, so as to shield them from the influence of the "bourgeois spirit" and make them a people "ready for the test"; 2) to establish a fully self-sufficient economy capable of making the country as self-sufficient as possible; 3) to equip Italy with a military force also adequate for the "test"152. To accomplish all this (leaving aside, of course, the question of whether it was possible or not), how much time did Mussolini think he would have at his disposal? It is impossible to say precisely. What can be said is that he certainly did not anticipate a demanding "trial" before 1943–44. In fact, the World's Fair, the "Olympics," was supposed to be held in Rome in 1942

152 In addition to military and technical aspects, Mussolini believed the armed forces also needed to be transformed morally. In G. Bottai's Diary, ff. 736 ff., dated October 26, 1939, the following is recorded in this regard: "The conversation turns to the Army. He openly expresses his contempt for its backward mentality. "There can no longer be an army of a dynasty. Even if armies have ever supported dynasties, they supported them when they were at their height, only to abandon them when they fell." We must move toward a people's army. I refer to my experience in Africa, advocating for the principle of an armed people (militia) in a permanent mobilization of the leadership. He offers this definition of the General Staff: "It is the body that prepares for yesterday's wars in order to lose tomorrow's victory." Regarding the German army, he admires certain revolutionary innovations: the shared rations for soldiers and combat officers, which creates a new military culture; and the deep penetration into enemy territory, without any concern for lines of communication, flank protection, etc."

of "civilizations"—as he called it—which, for him, was to serve a dual purpose: to confer prestige and to glorify, through its grandeur ("the Italian section of the 1942 Exposition is destined to endure for centuries, with buildings that will have the proportions of St. Peter's and the Colosseum... the whole will be dominated by a gigantic Roman arch") and its perfect organization, the twentieth anniversary of his rule, and economic—to provide the Italian economy with a massive, extraordinary influx of hard currency that would serve to replenish the reserves depleted by the wars in Ethiopia and Spain and by the autarkic policy, and to cover the final expenses for that policy and for war preparations. All things considered, this suggests that even 1943 was, in reality, nothing more than a post quem date. And in 1943, Mussolini would have turned sixty—an age at which he could realistically expect to still be in sufficient physical and mental condition to undertake his great trial.

But what did this "ordeal" consist of? What was Mussolini aiming for? Much has been speculated about this, based essentially on Mussolini's phrase "march to the Ocean," as reported by Ciano in his diary[154], and attributing a very broad meaning to it. The report delivered by Mussolini to the Grand Council on the night of February 4–5, 1939, for which—as with the one he had delivered on November 30, 1938—he required all those present to maintain the strictest confidentiality, is the only document to which one can refer. Closely linked to it is the speech of November 30, for which, however, we have only the summaries recorded in the diaries of Ciano, Bottai, and De Bono. According to Ciano's account,[55] Mussolini reportedly "said more or less":

I am informing you of the immediate goals of Fascist dynamism. Just as Adwa was avenged, we will avenge Valona. Albania will become Italian. I cannot and do not yet wish to tell you when or how. But it will happen. Furthermore, for the sake of our security in this Mediterranean that still constrains us, we need Tunisia and Corsica. The border must extend to the Varo River. I am not focusing on Savoy because it lies outside the Alpine circle. Instead, I am keeping the Ticino in mind, because Switzerland has lost its cohesive strength and is destined one day to be dismembered, as many small countries will be. All of this is a program. I cannot set specific time frames. I am merely outlining the general direction of our advance.

The writings of De Bono and, above all, of Bottai,[56] contain, in addition, some indirect and quite interesting details regarding relations with Germany and add Djibouti to Italy's territorial claims. Bottai wrote:

I want to tell you what the guiding principles of Fascist dynamism will be in the years to come. We do not set specific dates. The pace of our action will vary over time, depending on circumstances. We have avenged Adwa with the conquest of Ethiopia. We will avenge Valona with the annexation of Albania. We need Albania to exert influence over the Balkan region. We will counter the German line of penetration along the Danube with the Durres–Istanbul line. Turning to the Mediterranean: our position in this enclosed sea is dire. We must improve it. We need Tunisia—and Corsica. Then there is another issue with France: Djibouti. Finally, we will set our sights on Switzerland. Switzerland is collapsing. Young Swiss people do not feel a sense of belonging to Switzerland. We will extend our border to the Gotthard Pass.

The report of February 4–5 is essentially nothing more than the elaboration and development of what Mussolini had already stated on November 30. Given its importance and since we will need to refer to it in the coming chapters, it is appropriate to reproduce it in its entirety in the written text—contrary to his usual practice—drafted by Mussolini and not only read by him in the Grand Council, but also sent to the king,57, so that—as stated in the opening lines—it would remain in the records of fascism's supreme body to indicate the future objectives of fascist foreign policy. Here it is[158]:

This report is written so that it may remain in the records of the Grand Council as a guiding document for Italian foreign policy in the short, long, and very long term. The premise of which I speak is as follows: states are more or less independent depending on their maritime position. That is to say, those states that possess ocean coasts or have free access to the oceans are independent; those states that do not communicate freely with the oceans and are enclosed by inland seas are semi-independent; and those states that are entirely landlocked, with no access to either oceans or seas, are not independent.

Italy belongs to the second category of states. Italy is bordered by an inland sea, which connects to the oceans via the Suez Canal—an artificial passage that can easily be blocked even with makeshift means—and via the Strait of Gibraltar, dominated by British cannons.

Italy therefore has no free access to the oceans; Italy is thus truly a prisoner in the Mediterranean, and the more populous and powerful Italy becomes, the more it will suffer from this confinement.

The bars of this prison are Corsica, Tunisia, Malta, and Cyprus; the sentinels of this prison are Gibraltar and Suez. Corsica is a gun pointed at the heart of Italy; Tunisia at Sicily, while Malta and Cyprus pose a threat to all our positions in the central and western Mediterranean. Greece, Turkey, and Egypt are states ready to join forces with Great Britain and complete the political and military encirclement of Italy. Greece, Turkey, and Egypt must be considered states that are virtually enemies of Italy and its expansion. From this situation—whose stark geographical reality is plain to see and which, even before our regime, tormented those who could see beyond the immediate political circumstances—the following conclusions can be drawn:

157 Upon receiving the text, the king acknowledged receipt to Mussolini with a very brief note in which he thanked him "for sending the report, which is so important and so clear, and which I have read with the keenest interest" (ACS, B. Mussolini, Valigia, b. t, file 6).

158 The original of the report has disappeared from the file of the Duce's Private Secretariat where it was kept. The text is derived from photographic copies made by the Allies after Italy's surrender (frame numbers 000038 through 000046) preserved in Washington and at St. Anthony's College in Oxford; G. Bottai, *Diario*, ff. 629 ff., provides a very brief but faithful summary of it.

ia. The task of Italian politics—which cannot and does not have continental objectives of a European territorial nature, except for Albania—is first and foremost to break the prison bars.

2a. Once the bars are broken, Italian politics can have only one watchword: march toward the ocean.

Which ocean? The Indian Ocean, linking Sudan, Libya, and Ethiopia, or the Atlantic via French North Africa.

In both the first and second scenarios, we are faced with Franco-British opposition. Attempting to resolve this problem without having our backs secured on the continent is absurd. The policy of the Rome-Berlin Axis therefore responds to a fundamental historical necessity. Such was our stance in the Spanish Civil War.

These premises may seem distant, but they lead me straight to November 30, 1936, and the rally at the Fascist Chamber. After Munich, the propaganda of our external and even internal adversaries was conducted along these lines: first, that Chamberlain was the true architect of peace; 2) that Italy pretended to mobilize, given the opposition of the people and the Crown, but did not actually mobilize; 3) that the Axis had worked once again and functioned exclusively in Germany's favor. This last point was the most insinuated and widespread in France and, by extension, in Italy.

The three propositions set forth above are false, and the last one is particularly so. In the January 13, 1939, issue of *Le Figaro*, the writer Lucien Romier—one of the finest—sets the record straight: "Everyone says," he writes, "that Germany is politically indebted to Italy. Let's do the math. Germany annexed Austria and dismantled Czechoslovakia. It was aided by Italy's non-intervention in Central Europe and by the protective barrier that Italy provided to the south of the Danube countries, along the Alps, the Adriatic, and the Mediterranean. But on the other hand, Italy was able to withstand the sanctions and quickly conquer Ethiopia thanks to Germany. If Germany, as England had requested, had enforced the sanctions, the outcome of the Italian campaign would have been highly uncertain. Likewise, thanks to pressure from the Axis—that is, from Germany—Italy succeeded in having its conquest recognized and in replacing the Chamberlain policy toward it with an Eden policy."

However, since a policy must take public sentiment into account—even if it is not justified by the logic of the facts—and above all for the vital reasons I set forth in the first part of my report, I ordered the Party to begin stirring up the waters of the Mediterranean, to bring to the public's attention issues that seemed to have been set aside but had not actually been abandoned by the government, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs will demonstrate to you in his report on the activities carried out in Corsica and Tunisia by our official bodies and our cells.

This propaganda was to be carried out, initially, through word of mouth, from circle to circle, and was not to—until further notice—escalate into public demonstrations.

The session of November 30.

An authoritarian and totalitarian regime—that is, one without opposition parties—must have the courage for self-criticism. Following the unexpected demonstration on November 30—a demonstration that was in the air but could have unfolded differently had it been premeditated—we must take stock of the positives and negatives. On the negative side are the following points: 1a) The demonstration in the Chamber overshadowed—indeed, relegated to second place—all the work carried out by Italy before and during the Munich Conference; 2a) The demonstration set off alarms—something that needed to be avoided—both political and military alarms, leading to consequent measures in Corsica, Tunisia, and Djibouti; 3a) Not all the demands were in line with the regime's stance. Now Fascist foreign policy must establish this axiom: everything on this side of the Alps belongs to us; everything on the other side does not belong to us. This applies to Savoy. As for Nice, it is a matter of a modest border adjustment and a city that is by now completely Frenchified; 4a) On the very day when—through the general strike—the crisis in French politics seemed to be reaching its peak, the demonstration by the Fascist deputies immediately turned the situation around and reestablished a new "sacred union" against Italy. However, one should not assume that this "sacred union" will last forever in a country like France. Indeed, the January 19 issue of *Le Petit Bleu* reported the following regarding parliamentary inconsistency and confusion: "Everyone was united yesterday in opposing Italian claims; today, the insults and divisions over Spain have resumed." But the unity against Italy remains; ja) The demonstration held on the eve of Ribbentrop's trip may have given the impression that it was a gesture of spite directed at the Franco-German agreement, which I had approved as early as October and which was described by those who negotiated it as "a big lemonade"; 6a) The demonstration jeopardized Chamberlain's trip to Rome, a trip that was desirable for reasons that are all too obvious; 7a) The demonstration prompted Daladier's trip to Corsica and Tunisia, as well as a surge in French neo-imperialism; 8a) It gave the world the impression that the conquest of the Empire had disappointed us.

On the positive side are the following points: ia) We presented our Mediterranean problem to the world, even though it is largely hostile to us. Duff Cooper's article is significant in this regard; 21') The end of Francophilia based on the "Latin sisterhood," thanks in part to the vicious insults the French press has hurled at our armed forces; 3") The growing popularity of the Axis, given the Berlin press's stance of full solidarity and thanks to the Führer's statements.

December 17.

The Chamber's resolution did not bind the government, but the Fascist government could not ignore it. On December 17, the Minister of Foreign Affairs sent a letter from the French Ambassador, in which he declared that the Mussolini-Laval agreements of January 1933 had "not entered into force."

From a strictly legal standpoint, our position is irrefutable. None of the clauses of those agreements have been implemented: they have lapsed. With the note of December 17, the Fascist government took stock of the diplomatic situation, but at the same time acknowledged the limits of our aspirations—aspirations not of a metropolitan nature, but colonial ones, namely Tunisia, Djibouti, and Suez. France responded, in effect, with a "fin de non recevoir," that is, by advancing the position opposite to ours. Since then, there has been no further contact, nor will there be any before the end of the Spanish Civil War, as has been formally declared to Chamberlain.

What do we want?

Although Corsica cannot—based on the note of December 17—serve as a subject for negotiations—and although Corsica, it must be acknowledged, is now deeply Frenchified—we cannot renounce it, because Corsica—in addition to being geographically, historically, ethnically, and linguistically Italian

—represents a vital strategic interest for us. The course of action can only be as follows: 1. Revive the Corsicans' desire for autonomy; 2. Work toward Corsica's independence; 3. Annexation to Italy.

Tunisia.

Territorial claims against Tunisia could only be advanced in full agreement with the Arab world. Phase 1: therefore, a statute for Italians in Tunis; Phase 2: replace France with Italy in the Bey's protectorate.

Djibouti.

As far as Djibouti is concerned, there are greater possibilities for negotiations, partly because Great Britain would have no reason to fear changes in the status quo in the Mediterranean. Here, in addition to railway and port concessions, territorial cessions can be obtained, but it remains to be seen whether the potential compensation to be offered to France would be excessive.

Foreseeable Developments.

Italy can choose one or the other of the following courses of action:

a) not to pursue the matter further and wait for better times; leaving everything to a general resolution of events that will not be long in coming. In other words, to sweep the issue under the rug. But after so much uproar, such a solution would be viewed as a humiliating strategic retreat, a "step backward," tantamount to a diplomatic defeat. Both Fascists and non-Fascists might conclude that all it took was for France to regain a bit of "bite" to nip the natural aspirations of the Italian people "in the bud."

b) negotiate, taking as a starting point the Italian note of December 17—namely, the status of Italians in Tunis, Italian railway and port interests in Somalia, Suez Canal tolls, and a few border adjustments. An agreement of this kind would not be ideal, but if presented appropriately to the Italian people, it would ultimately meet with their approval, not least because it would avert potential complications.

c) present our maximum program to France at the appropriate time. Here, there are only two possible scenarios. Either France agrees to discuss the matter, in which case we remain on diplomatic ground, or France rejects every proposal, in which case there would be no alternative but to resort to arms.

Characteristics of a Franco-Italian War.

There is no doubt that a showdown between us and France will one day be inevitable, not least because France respects only those nations that have defeated it. The question is whether the time is right. Let us examine the nature that an Italian-French war might take. From a land-based perspective in the Alps, there is no possibility of a decisive outcome. It is difficult for us to cross, and equally difficult for the French. In Libya, neither our defensive preparations nor theirs give grounds to hope for a decisive outcome on that front. The only land front where French forces could be overwhelmed is the Somali front, although today this is already less feasible than before. The Franco-Italian war would therefore take on an air and naval character. Here we can consider ourselves, if not superior, at least equal in strength. Such a war could last a very long time unless other factors intervene to accelerate it or unless it takes on a European and global character.

Can we count on German solidarity? After the Führer's speech, there can be no doubt about it.

Are we today, in February 1939, in the "ideal" conditions to wage a war? No state is ever in the "ideal" conditions to wage a war, if by that we mean a mathematical certainty of victory. Every war—even the best-prepared one—has its unknowns. But there is no doubt that our preparedness will be better in a few years, specifically:

a) when we have modernized all our artillery (1941–42);

b) when we have all eight battleships and perhaps twice as many submarines in service (1941–42);

c) when the empire is fully pacified, self-sufficient, and able to provide us with the "Black Army";

d) once we have achieved at least 50% of our autarkic plans;

e) once the 1942 exhibition has closed—an exhibition that must bolster our reserves;

/) when we have repatriated as many Italians as possible from France. These 600,000–700,000 Italians residing in France constitute a truly serious problem.

As things stand, Fascist diplomacy will work to achieve the best solution referred to in point two, and at the same time, the armed forces will expedite their preparations so as to be ready to face any eventuality.

As can be seen, the actual "march to the Ocean" was not a short-term goal for Mussolini. It was to be part of his long-term—and, more likely, very long-term—plans. In the short term—aside from Albania, for which it would be more accurate to speak of the very short term—Mussolini was thinking only of "breaking the bars" of the Mediterranean "prison." And not even all of them, just those held by France: Corsica and Tunisia. Those held by the British—Malta and Cyprus—remained, in fact, outside his short-term plans. Thus, one can hypothesize a division of the "march to the Ocean" into three phases: first (in the short term and, in any case, not before the closure of E 42): Corsica and Tunisia; second (in the long term): Malta and Cyprus; third (in the very long term): Suez or Gibraltar. Translated into operational political terms, all this meant that Mussolini, despite having secured Axis cover on the continent—that is, in the Alps—did not intend, at least for the time being, to enter into conflict with England. His enemy was, for the time being, France, against whom the first phase was to be carried out, if possible without resorting to arms—that is, by playing on the German threat and on the conviction that—faced with the new situation created by the Axis—England would either reach a Mediterranean agreement with Italy to detach it from Germany or would remain neutral in the event of an Italian-French conflict. It is quite telling in this regard that, as part of this strategy, Mussolini, in April–May 1938, considered proposing to the Germans—in order to "give substance to the Axis" and prevent it from losing significance after the agreements with England—only a "pact of mutual respect," while at the same time taking care to "seal the borders with Germany" (by constructing the "Vallo del Littorio" at the Brenner Pass) and to make "those with Yugoslavia semi-hermetic," because, as Ciano reports, he believed a "Slavic-German alliance based on the two irredentist movements" was possible.[59] As Ciano would write in late October 1938, it was, in short, a matter of "keeping both doors open" between Germany and England and of not closing, "perhaps forever, one of them—and not the least important one"—through a full-fledged alliance with Germany.[60] Nor, on closer inspection, is the meaning of the position that Mussolini outlined on the evening of March 21, 1939, to the Grand

Council—immediately after Hitler, in violation of the Munich Agreement, had occupied Bohemia and Moravia—very different.[161] It is true that, despite what had happened, he adamantly maintained that we should not "abandon" the Germans, but he did so by framing the issue within the broader context of the German question from Versailles onward, in order to reiterate his accusation against France of having, by allowing the "Four-Power Pact" to fall by the wayside at the time 162, "demolished this means of containing Germany" and, more importantly, concluding that through the agreement with Germany, we are the arbiters of the situation in Europe. If we do not want it, Germany will not be encircled. This is our pledge. In this situation, France will not go to war. We must follow the Axis policy as a serious nation. No waltzing around.

On April 26, 1938, after outlining the general political situation, Mussolini told Badoglio that "while we need not be concerned about either the western or the eastern border, very serious precautions must be taken at the northern border," ACS, Ministry of the Navy, Cabinet (1934–30), b. 68, file "Mobilization," Badoglio to Cavagnari, April 27, 1938. Mussolini returned to this issue several times, until February 14, 1940, when, speaking before the Supreme Defense Commission, he said: "Today our country is fortifying itself and barring its gates. A breach of our fortified belt must not only be impossible, but must be unthinkable.

"We have a fortification that has been given to us by the Almighty, but the valleys—among the mountains—must be blocked with a network of fortifications, rather than a single line, so that not even the wind can pass through. This applies to all fronts, including the Swiss front: the western, northern, and
northeastern fronts; fortifications along the entire line, from Ventimiglia to the Kvarner Gulf.

"Work is underway, and the framework will be ready before summer. Naturally, it will be refined afterward." ACS, Ministry of Italian Africa, Directorate General of Political Affairs (1900–43), b. 9, "Minutes of the 17th Session of the Supreme Defense Commission (February 8–14, 1940)."

Despite the attack on the "waltz moves," such an approach to the problem can hardly be interpreted as a abandonment of the "two open doors" policy.

What can be said about this program? At first glance, it might be linked to the old, traditional Grandi-Mussolini approach to Italian foreign policy in terms of "decisive influence." Indeed, it shares that approach's general, underlying realism. But, on closer inspection, it lacks that—so to speak—specific detail. Even setting aside for a moment the conviction that England would not support France, its perspective in fact failed to consider what the attitude of the USSR and the United States would have been. There was no trace whatsoever of the Soviet factor (to which Grandi would, as we shall see, have drawn Mussolini's attention in vain as late as April 1940, emphasizing its decisive importance). Mussolini made a brief mention of the American factor in the Grand Council on March 21, 1939, only to dismiss the issue immediately:

A united front of democracies? Nothing will come of it. The United States will supply cannons for cash.

For a realist like Mussolini, it is difficult to imagine that he simply underestimated two such important elements of the international situation. The most likely explanation is another one, which, moreover, also helps explain the "Duce's" conviction that England would either not support France or, indeed, would come to an agreement with Italy: the interplay between his long-standing realism and the influence of the myth of the "crisis of civilization" that was corroding non-fascist societies from within.

The case of the USSR was the most obvious. The great Stalinist trials against the Bolshevik "old guard" and the purges were there to demonstrate that the Soviet state was in an advanced state of dissolution. As Iw wrote in *Il Popolo d'Italia* on April 8, 1937,

Conspiracies, trials, death sentences for the old Bolsheviks, economic collapse, universal and abject misery: this is the twenty-year record of the regime, which still finds—albeit increasingly rare, but increasingly foolish—indulgent observers in the countries of the "great" democracies. The Yagoda case, the third in the series, is a sure sign of Russia's advanced state of internal disintegration.

In this situation, with "all the high- and low-ranking officers of the Red Army" destined to fall prey to "a tremendous crisis of mistrust"[164], the USSR ceased, in his view, to be a significant factor on the international stage. The situation is more complex when it comes to the United States. In fact, Mussolini had a dual attitude toward the United States. On the one hand, he admired its "youth," its civic spirit, "the splendid collective spirit that always triumphs over individual selfishness," and its "sense of the masses," which translated into "consciousness and power in the face of Europe's individualistic and decadent particularism,"65. On the other hand, however, he considered their "spirit" to be contrary to the "classical" spirit of Europeans[166] and therefore incapable both of shaking off selfishness and of truly rising to the heights of creating a genuine civilization. Moreover, the United States was deeply undermined by the rot of supercapitalism and democracy. Although it was a one-off proposal and was met with the most critical response by the vast majority of the mainstream press and the most responsible political class, a proposal such as the one put forward toward the end of 1937 by over two hundred members of Congress to amend the U.S. Constitution so that any decision by the government to enter the war

Mussolini often judged peoples according to his own increasingly rigid criteria. Here is how F. Suvich summarized them in his memoirs, with particular reference to the years 1932–36, when he had daily contact with him: "His state of mind regarding foreign peoples and the various races was complex.

"He did not like the Prussian spirit, which he knew and judged well, and was, by his nature as a Latin and a Catholic, fundamentally hostile to Nazi philosophy; yet he was impressed [nc] by the national and military spirit of the Germans. On the other hand, he was captivated by the French spirit and culture, a fascination he deliberately tried to resist, because he considered France a militarily decadent nation...

"I don't think he truly grasped the Anglo-Saxon spirit; he did not like England, but he admired its military tradition—especially its naval tradition—and its pride; he had a marked fondness for North Americans (he received many of them), but he was largely limited to the outward forms of their open-mindedness and their 'buoyancy'; I don't think he had a sufficiently precise understanding of their formidable efficiency and potential.

"With regard to the Russians, he held—if I may use the term—a multifaceted position; he fought communism at home and would not tolerate Russian influence in our country, but he harbored no prejudicial hostility toward Russian communism: he followed its evolution with interest and was rather impressed by Stalin's personality; and he sought to foster Russia's rapprochement with the West.

"He had a very special fondness for the Dutch, admiring this small people who had managed to build a great empire. He liked their calm demeanor and their good-natured spirit: 'quiet people,' as he told me one day, 'who see the whole world through rose-colored glasses': a curious inclination—and I have no

reason to believe it was insincere, given that these people were at the opposite end of the spectrum from his own temperament; he distinguished them from other Northern Europeans, whose reputation for coldness he considered a myth. He used to say that they're more hysterical than we Latins and that we're more balanced...

"He had a marked preference for Jews (the racist campaign of a few years later belongs to an entirely different category) who, after all, had always been part of his life: he admired their intelligence, their liveliness of spirit, and their genius...

"The way foreign nations judged Italy—and in particular the valor of the Italian soldier—had a profound influence on his judgment and sympathies. On this point, he possessed a legitimate sensitivity, though it reached exasperated and morbid extremes. Any comment that sounded disrespectful toward Italian valor would send him into a rage, and he would find no peace until he had exhausted all the considerable resources of his polemics and all possible retaliatory measures through the Italian press."

The fact that it had to be approved by a popular referendum to become law was, for him, indicative not only of the absurdity and degeneration of the democratic system, but also of the harm it had inflicted on a people who were otherwise so "sound" as the American people,[167] and it ultimately took on symbolic significance in his eyes, leading him to conclude here as well that the United States did not constitute a real problem either, and that its "solidarity" with other democracies would amount to nothing more than doing good business. Roughly speaking, in short, the same line of reasoning he applied to England—which for a long time led him to believe that, in the short term, as long as only France was in the hot seat, he could avoid a break with it and even find—as he told Ward Price in early November 1936[168]—a formula for "safeguarding Anglo-Italian interests in the Mediterranean". A myth, a dream, which Mussolini in 1938—with the "Easter Agreements" with London and the Munich Agreement—must have deluded himself for a moment into believing he was on the verge of realizing, thereby achieving two decisive results for him at once: driving a wedge between England and France and, at the same time, securing—thanks to the agreement with London—a position of strength vis-à-vis Germany. Truly significant in this regard is what Bruno Spampanato,169 a faithful interpreter of Mussolini's policies, wrote in commentary on the "Easter Agreements" (which, in his view, had enshrined the principle of "parity and imperial condominium" in the Mediterranean) on the eve of Hitler's visit to Rome—even before, therefore, the Munich Agreement sealed the submissiveness of London and Paris:

On the occasion of the welcome visit by the Führer of the German Reich, Italy displays in honor of its guest its troops, its air force, its fleet, its ranks of soldiers, and its immense and disciplined crowds. An instructive spectacle for all, from which it will be permissible—or even necessary—to draw a moral: namely, that "this" Empire has been born, and its existence must be accepted and respected, just as Imperial Britain, in its wisdom, has done.

A little over a year later, events would spectacularly disprove this dream, and Mussolini would have to return from the realm of myth to that of reality and seek new paths for his politics—once again getting his predictions wrong. As we shall see in the following chapters, the claim—sometimes made—that the responsibility for throwing Italy into Germany's arms lay primarily with the short-sightedness of the Anglo-French is true only to a very limited extent.

International politics and major historical events are not detective novels in which there is a murderer to be uncovered. But if we wish to speak metaphorically in this case, it must be said that Mussolini's "murderer" was above all his idea of the "crisis of civilization" and his myth of the "new civilization":

it was on these fantastical cliffs that both his realism and his tactical skill largely came crashing down, both in relation to Germany and to the other major players on the international stage. To say this and to answer the question from which we began seem to us to be one and the same. Even though he was driven by “great” ideals, even though he played a major role and bore great responsibility in the events leading up to World War II, Mussolini was not a great man—not even “a great pure destroyer.” A man like him, who knew perfectly well—and theorized at every opportunity—what a myth was and how the “true” politician should make use of it, would have had to, above all, avoid becoming a victim of that very myth himself in order to be great. Some might say that Hitler, too, pursued a myth. That is true, but he had always pursued it. Mussolini did not. For years he had been a realist, often down-to-earth. And for the most part, he remained so even when he fell victim to the myth. Hence his personal tragedy, which would erupt after the invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War II.

Chapter Four

Fascist Politics in the Spanish Quicksand

On March 23, 1936, at the Second National Assembly of the Corporations, Mussolini had stated that with the entry into force of the sanctions, a “new phase” of Italian history had begun[1]:

The economic blockade… has raised a multitude of problems that can all be summed up in this proposition: political autonomy—that is, the possibility of an independent foreign policy—can no longer be conceived without a corresponding capacity for economic autonomy. This is the lesson none of us will ever forget! Those who think that once the blockade ends we will return to the situation of November 17 are mistaken.

November 18, 1935, is now a date that marks the beginning of a new phase in Italian history. November 18 carries within it something definitive—I would say irreparable. The new phase of Italian history will be dominated by this principle: to achieve, in the shortest possible time, the greatest possible autonomy in the nation’s economic life.

As we have already seen[2], these words must be regarded as the announcement of what would become the autarkic policy—not only as a necessity imposed by the sanctions, but as a permanent feature of the Italian economy even after their end[3]. Some

3 Even without wishing in any way to attribute to N. Bombacci the “credit” for having suggested

Mussolini the autarkic policy—but merely to demonstrate how certain political-economic solutions had been gaining ground for some time, particularly on the “left”—it is worth noting a letter that the

July 6, 1934, from the former Communist deputy, who by the end of the previous year had already aligned himself with positions of clear support (“You are the happy and faithful interpreter of a new political and economic order that is emerging and developing with the decline of capitalism and the death of social democracy... “I feel that within the Corporation, under your leadership, under the leadership of the totalitarian Fascist State, it is only possible to find, at this historical juncture, the harmony necessary for civil progress and the well-being of society,” he had written to Mussolini on November 17, 1933), had addressed to the “Duce,” who, upon reading it, had written in the margin: “present me with a detailed plan.” In it, Bombacci had proposed the establishment of a Center “capable of understanding and making itself heard by the relevant institutions and individuals” and which was to “first study, then advise, and above all persuade, importers, merchants, and industrialists to find—

without a public fuss—the best way to replace, whenever possible, foreign products with domestic ones, satisfying the consumer and serving the interests of the national economy." And, if necessary, it should make it clear to economic operators "that the Fascist state, being corporatist in nature, will have to resort to authoritarian measures to regulate foreign trade in relation to the entire national economic life if there is no effective collaboration from the relevant sectors" (ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence [1922–1943], H/R, file "Nicola Bombacci").

However, he also chose to see in them something more: a sort of announcement that the sanctions had definitively and irreparably altered Fascist foreign policy as well, and had convinced the "Duce" that, if Italy wanted to play a significant international role, it could do so "only against—and no longer alongside—the two Western democracies" and, therefore, with Germany against England and France.[4] Such an interpretation, however, is too heavily influenced by "hindsight," is ahead of its time, and distorts Mussolini's actual intentions. It is true that when the "Duce" made the statement in question—the most dramatic moment of the Ethiopian War for him, that immediately following the failure of the Hoare-Laval plan, had by then—in the wake of the new development of the remilitarization of the Rhineland—passed, and he could look to the future with fewer concerns and begin to anticipate the taste of success and, at most, even entertain thoughts of revenge against France and, above all, England. However, it is a long leap from this to say that he was considering such a radical reversal of his policy. On closer inspection, the passage does not warrant such a broad interpretation. It is precluded by the premise from which his argument proceeds: the need for Italy to position itself to enjoy its own "political autonomy" and to have "the possibility of an independent foreign policy." Since it must be ruled out that Mussolini was envisioning "autonomy" in opposition to everyone, this premise fundamentally negated the very possibility of such a radical reversal, which, instead of enhancing and exalting the "independence" of Italian foreign policy, would have severely restricted—and practically nullified—its margins of "autonomy." It is clear, in fact, that—since it entailed an explicit choice of sides—it would have meant renouncing not only an entire diplomatic tradition (something extremely difficult in foreign policy, where there are "laws" of an almost natural kind) that was alive and deeply felt throughout much of the "career" but also in broad sectors of fascism, but—and most importantly—it would have meant renouncing the policy of "decisive influence," which alone could ensure—or at least give the illusion of ensuring—that Fascist foreign policy retained its own "autonomy." And this was especially true given the prospect that the success achieved in the Ethiopian conflict and Germany's growing dynamism would lead England to reconsider its policy toward Italy and, sooner or later, accept Mussolini's request to reach a general agreement that would place Italian-British relations in the Mediterranean on an equal footing. This applies not only to the second half of March 1936 but also to the period following the end of the Ethiopian conflict. In Mussolini's view, this prospect held definite value until the signing of the "Pact of Steel," but, as will be seen, in a certain sense even afterward—practically until France's military defeat in 1940.

In our view, one should not speak of a "reversal" of Fascist foreign policy in 1936, but rather of the beginning of a shift in its axis, accompanied by a new hierarchy of values attributed within that framework to France, England, and Germany. While France's importance declined in a certain sense in the eyes of Mussolini and Ciano, that of Germany rose, transforming from a "passive" deterrent, to exert pressure on France and, through it, on England, into a "dynamic" deterrent to exert pressure primarily on England—not so that England would in turn pressure France to reach an agreement with Italy, but so that it would finally agree to discuss the general agreement offered to it by Mussolini. And this without implying a genuine alignment with Germany, which would have been counterproductive for Mussolini both tactically and strategically; it would have nullified his "decisive influence," made him subservient to Germany, and created extremely serious obstacles regarding a whole series of issues that, rightly or wrongly, he believed needed to be resolved before he could regain the initiative on the

international stage.

We have already discussed some of these issues—those more directly related to the internal workings of the regime—and there is therefore no need to revisit them. We have also already discussed others—those related to the economic situation and the launch of the autarkic policy. However, they deserve to be briefly mentioned here insofar as they directly affected foreign policy. With a view to immediately reviving the Italian economy and simultaneously setting it on the path to autarky, it was essential to reactivate and increase imports and exports and to regain those markets that had begun to slip away from Italian trade during the war—particularly those in the Balkans, where German penetration, already significant, had increased even further in just a few months. And this was largely the task of Palazzo Chigi, which, in fact, immediately committed itself wholeheartedly to reestablishing the old relations at the governmental level (with France, a modus vivendi had already been signed on August 1, whereby the two governments agreed to admit each other's imports "to the greatest extent possible") and to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the contacts—both official and unofficial[5]—established for this purpose

5 Throughout the period under consideration, contacts made outside official diplomatic channels played a significant role in this regard, particularly through correspondents of the Stefani News Agency and the numerous representatives and envoys of the CAUR. Especially in the Balkan Peninsula, to assess the political stances toward Italy of the various former sanctioning countries—and in particular those in the Mediterranean basin, which had aligned most closely with England during the war (Greece and Turkey)—as well as those of the Little Entente, and above all Yugoslavia and Romania. In the new situation shaped by growing political and economic dynamism—but also in the Baltic states— an increasingly intense "parallel diplomacy" began to take shape in the second half of the 1930s. This diplomacy often enjoyed considerable autonomy from official channels (which were sometimes kept almost entirely in the dark about many of its initiatives) and operated with ample financial resources that allowed it to fund political groups—regarded, rightly or wrongly, as pro-Fascist or at least pro-Italian—as well as newspapers and individual politicians. To this day, there is no specific study on this "parallel diplomacy." The only somewhat substantial references to it, particularly regarding Eastern Europe and the CAUR, can be found in J. W. Borejsza, *Fascism and Eastern Europe: From Propaganda to Aggression* (Bari, 1981).

Initiated by Mussolini in Germany in the 1920s, the practice of "parallel diplomacy" had gradually expanded further and further. Grandi at first and Suvich later, however, had largely succeeded in neutralizing it. In his memoirs, Suvich recalls the efforts he made with Mussolini. Speaking of his daily interactions with him at Palazzo Venezia, he wrote: "[Mussolini's] Foreign Affairs folder usually contained a few reports from volunteer observers—or perhaps those he had appointed; I didn't know for sure—and a few clippings from Italian and foreign newspapers that he thought might be of interest. 'I act as secretary to my undersecretaries,' he told me one day, and that was somewhat true. These reports he received directly were a problem. They generally came from ill-prepared people who went abroad already predisposed to find that whatever our diplomatic and consular representatives were doing was wrong, that they were all snobs, that they lacked sensitivity to national interests, and that they spent their days chasing after women or playing golf or bridge. Naturally, once they arrived on the scene, they found that things were exactly as they had imagined, and thus the "report to the Duce."

"Mussolini—though respectful of hierarchies—due to his innate, ever-present inclination toward heterodoxy, encouraged these unofficial informants; he would read their reports and then pass them on to me, marked with underlines and annotations in red and blue. "Do you see, Suvich, what the ambassador is doing…?" "No, Mr. President, so-and-so says that the ambassador is doing… and he's

probably wrong. Let me look into it."

"It was truly a Sisyphean task to dislodge some of his preconceptions, because he'd just go right back to square one. But in the end, the report would end up in the depths of the archive, and it was never mentioned again."

In the second half of the 1930s, it eventually spread even to the most cautious and traditionalist institutions, causing confusion and perplexity even among some of those it was intended for, worrying various governments, and causing official diplomacy more difficulties than concrete benefits. Highly significant (also in other respects) is what D. Grandi wrote on September 28, 1937, in his capacity as ambassador to London, to the naval attaché at his own embassy: "The Royal Ministry of the Navy, Information Office—MARISTAT—with the recklessness and incompetence typical of certain military offices that seek to engage in foreign policy instead of tending to their own ships, guns, torpedoes, and those of others, has recently organized an intelligence and political liaison service between its own personnel and so-called confidants of the British Government. From investigations I personally conducted, I have been able to ascertain that the individuals in charge of this service are nothing more than discredited braggarts, ignorant of the British political scene. In any case, having identified these representatives of the Royal Ministry of the Navy's Maristat Intelligence Division, I have ordered the London Combat Group to give them a thorough beating, so that they may be able to report something more precise and concrete regarding the results of their mission in London.

"These representatives, in order to lend credibility to their political mission, naturally presented themselves in the circles of the House of Commons and the Admiralty as representatives of the Royal Ministry of the Navy, thereby giving the impression that, while the Duce and the Minister of Foreign Affairs are speaking harshly to the British Government in diplomatic negotiations, the Royal Navy, behind the scenes, is eager, on its own account, to establish political contacts and seek a political understanding—which, of course, cannot fail to be interpreted in British circles as the result of an excessive concern on the part of the Italian Navy to avert the possibility of a conflict with the British Navy. It is unnecessary for me to dwell on this to make Your Excellency aware of the deleterious effects of all this on our prestige and, above all, on the prestige of our heroic Navy...» (ACS, Ministry of Aeronautics, Cabinet, 1937, b. 38, file 9-1-7; as well as the D. Grandi Archive, b. 47, file 112, which also contains another letter from Grandi to Ciano dated the same day regarding the episode, with further details and negative assessments of the contacts sought by the Navy in England).

In fact, these last two countries were becoming increasingly important for Italy, because establishing good relations with them meant blocking Germany's push toward the southeast and alleviating, to some extent, its pressure on Hungary and, above all, on Austria—the only true points of support Rome had on the continent.

And then there was the major problem of completing the occupation and pacification of Ethiopia as soon as possible. The conquest of Addis Ababa and the Negus's flight had, in fact, concluded the conflict only from an international standpoint. For it to be effectively considered over, it was necessary to extend the occupation to the entire country—which was still largely in the hands of local chiefs—secure their submission, disarm their men, and concretely organize the new administrative structure of the colony. Only after that would it have been possible to withdraw most of the troops (a highly urgent measure given the financial burdens entailed by such a large army) and move on to the second phase of the conquest: the economic development of the Empire[6] and the creation of a large "black army"[7]. The importance and urgency that Mussolini attributed to the achievement of these three objectives partly explains (other reasons included the desire not to repeat the experience in Libya, where the reconquest

and “pacification” had dragged on for years, and the desire to demonstrate to the world that the Ethiopian peoples were favorable toward Italy, which had “liberated” from slavery and the oppression of the Negus)—not only the speed but also the extreme harshness with which the occupation and “pacification” were carried out, despite Mussolini’s keen interest in presenting the Italian presence in Ethiopia as one entirely focused on the civilizing work it was performing there. A role—in truth—that, once the first year and a half of the occupation had passed and despite many contradictions and dysfunctions, the Italian presence did manage to fulfill in certain sectors of Ethiopian life.

6 In early 1937, Mussolini sent G. Tassinari, the undersecretary of agriculture and forestry, to Africa for an initial assessment of the possibilities for economic exploitation and colonization of the Empire. Tassinari undertook an extensive tour of Somalia, Eritrea, Tigray, the Gondar region, Shoa, and Harar, arriving at the “carefully considered conviction”—as he telegraphed to Mussolini on the eve of his return to Italy, on February 25—that the Empire offered “great possibilities... for the Motherland to achieve economic independence” (ACS, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Cabinet, Records U934-1936, b. 1066, file 17/7, no. 6643/6.2).

In 1936–37, the Americans showed interest in the development of Ethiopia (thanks in part to Suvich’s intensive efforts in this regard in Washington) and sent former Under Secretary of State Phillips to Italy to study the issue. However, the deteriorating international situation led to a breakdown in contacts. A decisive factor was the growing rapprochement between Italy and Japan. As Suvich reported to Rome on December 3, 1937, this rapprochement had sparked hostility toward Italy in the U.S. (accused “of having aggravated the situation by breaking the solidarity among the signatory powers of the Nine-Power Treaty”) second only to that toward Japan. Added to this was Italy’s recognition of Manchukuo. Reporting on a conversation he had with Sumner Welles, Suvich wrote in this regard: “While until now the dispute with Italy had been limited mostly to the ideological sphere, now, following our alignment with Japan, [Italy] is considered to have definitively shifted to the camp of political interests opposed to those of the United States.” In this situation, as Suvich reported in another report dated January 14, 1938, “even those Americans who are favorably disposed toward Italy (and there are very many of them)—who had stood by us in the Ethiopian and Spanish issues—do not approve of our rapprochement with Japan at this time and are therefore unwilling to speak out in our favor in the face of the surging tide of hostilities” (ASAE, United States, b. 34 [1937] and b. 46 [1938]).

7 Mussolini first hinted at his intention to create a “Black Army” on May 8, 1936 (mentioning one million men); see P. Aloisi, Journal, op. cit., p. 382.

By the end of the winter of ’36–’37, the occupation was practically a fait accompli. To achieve it, a heavy hand had certainly been used. In fact, as early as July, Mussolini had authorized Graziani “to initiate and systematically carry out a policy of terror and extermination against the rebels and the populations complicit with them”[8]. Against the “rebels” and the populations supporting them, full-scale military operations were thus carried out, involving the use of aircraft and even asphyxiating gases (the use of which had also been personally authorized by the “Duce”). Nor were there any shortages of executions of prisoners and “rebel” leaders. The repression following the attack carried out in Addis Ababa on February 19, 1937, against Graziani—in which the viceroy was seriously wounded along with twenty-nine military personnel, thirty civilians, and five indigenous leaders—was particularly ruthless. For two days, the capital of the Empire had lived in terror (it is said that the death toll neared three thousand); then the repression subsided, but at the same time, it became more systematic and was extended to other localities as well, affecting—between those shot and those imprisoned in

concentration camps—several thousand individuals, including numerous religious figures. And if Mussolini had not intervened, things would have turned out even worse. Upon hearing the news of the attack, the "Duce" had been uncompromising: "All civilians and clergy who are in any way suspected must be executed without delay," he had telegraphed to Graziani. But when the viceroy proposed "razing the old indigenous city to the ground and confining the entire population to a concentration camp until they had rebuilt their homes," he hastened to telegraph him: "Such a measure would create a most unfavorable impression worldwide and would not achieve the desired result." Given this reality, the pacification took much longer than the conquest. Pockets of rebellion remained active here and there for a long time, and some never truly died out. A marked improvement in the situation would not begin to take shape until 1938, after Graziani's recall and his replacement by the Duke of Aosta;[9] this does not, however, mean that in some areas the so-called "large-scale police operations" would not have continued almost until they merged with those of World War II.[10]

9 Regarding the choice of the Duke of Aosta, see what Mussolini wrote to Graziani on November 10, 1937, to inform him of the end of his viceroyalty, Mussolini, XLII, p. 197. The arguments put forward were consistent with the "Duce's" mindset and modus operandi, as well as his growing fear of possible anti-Italian and anti-fascist "speculations." According to the aforementioned report by the French chargé d'affaires Blondel (DDF, vol. II, VII, pp. 864 ff.), the choice of the Duke of Aosta was instead, at least in part, dictated by the desire to favor the cadet branch of the House of Savoy, which held fascist sympathies, and thus fell within the context of the conflicts between Mussolini and the sovereign.

Mussolini had taken the first real step toward détente with Germany, as has been noted,[11] on January 6, 1936, at the most difficult moment of the entire Ethiopian affair. Speaking with the German ambassador von Hassel, he had hinted at the possibility that Berlin and Vienna might settle their relations on the basis of an amicable agreement that, on the one hand, would ensure Austrian independence and, on the other, would bring Austria "into Germany's wake" and make it a "satellite" state. The overture, however, had been met in Berlin with great (and justified) suspicion. "Here, there were fears of a Machiavellian maneuver by Mussolini—namely, that to alleviate his critical situation in Abyssinia, he intended to inflate the Austrian issue and subsequently make overtures to the Western powers."12 The only one to give it credence had been Hitler. Subsequently, Mussolini had taken a few more conciliatory steps. Italy's stance during the crisis triggered by the remilitarization of the Rhineland, however, must have done little to encourage the skeptics to trust the Führer's instincts. Mussolini had assured the Germans that he would not join in measures against them, but his stance had subsequently become more flexible. Finally, on March 19, Grandi (who had struck a quid pro quo deal with the British on the long-debated issue of tightening sanctions), by forcing his hand, had even voted —albeit with some reservations—to condemn Germany. With the Germans, the "Duce" had distanced himself from Grandi's actions and offered to reach an agreement with them on a common position regarding the Locarno issue; in practice, however—aside from the agreements between the two police forces that had been in the works for some time and a few visits by Nazi leaders to Italy and Fascist leaders to Germany —until the end of the Ethiopian conflict, not only had nothing new occurred in relations between the two countries, but the Italian side had been primarily concerned with reassuring Paris and London that the Italian-German rapprochement was "purely psychological in nature, without any underlying secret agreements or preparations for secret agreements." As we have already noted,13 these assurances had indeed been given by Suvich, who was clearly hostile to a rapprochement with Germany; however, there is no reason to believe that Mussolini did not share the approach and the same general outlook that his undersecretary of foreign affairs took toward Italian-German relations. The only real difference between the two was Mussolini's greater willingness to adopt a flexible stance, which, if necessary, would allow him to play the German card without too much difficulty in order to

avoid becoming completely isolated and to put pressure on the Anglo-French. To speak, as has been done, of a Mussolini-Suvich conflict is not justified. Mussolini himself believed that some people might believe this, especially after Suvich's departure from Palazzo Chigi. When he bid him farewell in June, he said: "And now they'll say that I'm dismissing my moderating influence and that I'm doing it to break with France and England, leave the League of Nations, and throw myself into Germany's arms." But he also added: "All nonsense, because I will continue to pursue the same policy with Galeazzo that I pursued with you." And, in his own way, he was sincere.

For an overview of the organization of the Empire, see A. Sbacchi, *Italian Colonialism in Ethiopia 1936–1940*, Milan 1980.

Of course, with Ciano as minister, Suvich could not remain undersecretary of foreign affairs. Apart from the fact that, since Lessona and Alfieri were being promoted to ministers, the move would have taken on a punitive tone—so much so that Mussolini was very keen to have him accept a highly prestigious embassy such as that in Washington (where, moreover, Suvich could be extremely useful for his stability and his relations with the international business community), just as he had done four years earlier when he appointed Grandi to London; aside from this, his continued presence at Palazzo Chigi was hindered, on the one hand, by the criticism and behind-the-scenes struggle waged against him by Ciano in the preceding months and, on the other hand, by the Germans' undisguised hostility toward him (Hitler speaking with Manacorda

14 f. Suvich, Memoirs. Even later, and under very different circumstances, Mussolini denied that Suvich's policy had not been his own. Here is how, again in his memoirs, Suvich recounted the episode that took place in 1942: "Mussolini used to receive, at fixed intervals, the federal secretaries of groups of neighboring provinces, who reported in writing on the situation."

"Once, while meeting with the secretaries of the Julian and Dalmatian provinces (Trieste, Fiume, Gorizia, Istria, Zara), the secretary from Trieste—who was a poor devil acting solely on instructions from party headquarters—came out with this bold statement while talking about the Trieste deputies (I'm quoting from memory based on what Ciano told me; he always obtained copies of the minutes from these meetings).

" " Referring, therefore, to the Trieste deputies, the Federal Secretary in question said: "And as for the honorable Suvich, of Slavic descent, who is known in Trieste for being the protector of Jews, Austrians, and anti-fascists, and who pursued an anti-Nazi policy contrary to the regime's directives..." At this point, Mussolini interrupted him, saying: "I forbid you to continue; Suvich belongs to a patriotic Italian family… and if he pursued that policy, he did so because that was my policy."

See also *Rapporto al Duce*, edited by G. B. Guerri, Milan 1978, p. 290.

(he had accused him of pursuing a "Trieste-style" policy). And this—even though Mussolini did not wish to reverse his policy toward Berlin, but only to establish a new type of relationship with Germany—obviously made it appropriate to seize the opportunity of a general government reshuffle to remove him with full honors from Palazzo Chigi. Saying this does not, however, mean that—at least in terms of his intentions—Mussolini was lying when he told Ciano that he intended to pursue the same policy with him as he had with Ciano. That this was his intention seems beyond doubt to us, and what we have already said about his concerns and his moves toward London and Paris immediately following the

conquest of Addis Ababa and the proclamation of the Empire seems to demonstrate this.[15] The German card was his last resort, to be played only if he failed to mend relations with the Western powers, and with England in particular. A last resort that was far from welcome and certainly burdensome, because—unless he could reach an agreement with Paris and London at the very last moment—sooner or later it would have led to the Anschluss; yet he was forced to resort to it very early on, practically immediately after the end of the war in Africa, when, in June, the British government's decision to recommend to the League of Nations the lifting of sanctions, accompanied, however, by Eden's continued tenure at the Foreign Office and the evident intention not to hear a word about a general agreement and not even to recognize the Empire, led him—obsessed as he was with the idea of finding himself isolated from everyone—to give the green light to the Austro-German agreement of July 11, through which Hitler began to undermine Austrian independence.

What likely prompted Mussolini to make this decision was Hitler's timing in letting him know, on June 29, that he was ready to recognize the Empire "without any quid pro quo" if Italy so desired. However, Ciano's presence at Palazzo Chigi must have carried far greater weight.

To say that Ciano was pro-Nazi would be to distort the reality. He was not, for reasons of taste and style, and because, ultimately, politics was for him something in which ideology and ideals had practically no place. Fascism had barely touched him, even though it had made him one of the regime's leading figures. Essentially, he was and considered himself a bourgeois conservative, a typical representative of a new aristocracy of power. As Bottai noted in his diary, Ciano proclaimed himself, "partly out of habit and partly out of innate inclination, frankly a 'forcaiolo'" and a "reactionary." For him, Fascism was synonymous with the regime, and the regime with power. And he viewed everything in terms of power. Hence his total deafness and insensitivity to what, for true Fascists—both old and young—were the ideals and issues of Fascism; to their concerns, as Fascists, regarding the failure of corporatism; to the regime's fundamental orientations; and to the "post-Mussolini" era. As a young man during the 1915–18 war, he had not experienced all of its drama, fears, and passions, and this contributed to his inability to feel the "German problem" with the same intensity as a Mussolini, a Suvich, or a Grandi, whose factions—though very different from one another—shared another thing that he lacked: a connection to the Risorgimento and thus a sort of anti-German tradition. Nor, in terms of character, should we underestimate what Luciana Frassati intuitively grasped when she met him: "He must have been good-natured but overzealous, like all young men whose careers have advanced too rapidly." 16. Having risen, at just over thirty-three years of age, to occupy practically the second-highest position in the regime—and, moreover, with the honor but also the burden of being the "Duce's" son-in-law—his ambition was to prove himself worthy of the position he held; his greatest desire was to use it to build his own power base that would allow him to overshadow all the other stars in the Fascist firmament (first and foremost the two brightest, Balbo and Grandi) and thus make his position as "heir apparent"—as Mussolini's successor, and not merely in pectore—absolutely secure. Although he by no means neglected other areas, the arena through which his definitive rise to prominence was to take place was that of foreign policy. A field in which his experience was, all things considered, quite limited and peripheral, but in which he was convinced he could accomplish a great deal—not so much in the sense of changing its fundamental character or basic tendencies—since he realized that, even if he had wanted to, he could not have done so, given that Mussolini would always have been standing behind him—but rather in the sense of making it more incisive and astute. In this regard, it is highly significant that his first act as foreign minister was to appoint O. De Peppo—who had been his director general for propaganda services at the Ministry of Press and Propaganda—as chief of staff in place of Aloisi, and to surround himself with his own people who were not tied to the administrations of Grandi and Suvich, removing nearly all of their predecessors. As part of this reshuffle, Grandi was initially supposed to be recalled from London as well. The intention, in truth, had

come from Mussolini, who was irritated by the praise that some major British newspapers were lavishing on his ambassador; but he later reconsidered, leaving Grandi in London 17. Ciano—whose plans and ambition were likely greatly hindered by Grandi's presence in London—had, however, done nothing to dissuade him, and it is very likely that he was deeply irritated by the "Duce's" change of heart. There is no other explanation for the underhanded campaign he waged against Grandi over the next three years, seeking to cast him in a negative light and take credit for his successes.

Although he was not pro-Nazi and did not wish to overturn Italian foreign policy, Ciano was nevertheless convinced that, in order to make it more incisive and astute and to be able to imprint the characteristics of his own personality upon it, it was necessary to adopt a less timid and more assertive attitude toward Berlin

17 The *Le Informazioni Cremonesi*, dated October 12 and 16, 1936, prove that news of Grandi's dismissal from London, his appointment as governor of the Dodecanese, and the revocation of the two measures leaked into Roman political circles, causing no small amount of astonishment.

D. Grandi recounted the episode as follows: "... On June 18, 1936... Eden, in a debate in the House of Commons, announced that the British cabinet had decided to recommend to the League of Nations the repeal of sanctions against Italy... The following morning, the *Daily Express* published a photograph of me with the caption "The winner." This is an expression used in England to refer to the winning horse in a race. The Stefani Agency correspondent in London, when transmitting the news to Rome, translated the phrase "The winner"—whether out of ignorance or malice—as "Il vittorioso." Mussolini flew into a rage and immediately ordered Ciano to replace me as Ambassador to London. Ciano telegraphed me to go to Rome at once and, not without obvious embarrassment, informed me of the Duce's decision, offering me the post of Ambassador to Buenos Aires or that of Governor of Rhodes and the Italian Aegean Islands. I felt embittered and weary. After four grueling years in London, the island of Rhodes seemed like a peaceful place to me. The governorship of Rhodes was considered a modest post, virtually ignored by Palazzo Chigi. Serving as Mussolini's ambassador in a major European capital was a difficult task. With the young Ciano as Foreign Minister, the difficulties would have been even greater. Without hesitation—and to Ciano's visible surprise—I accepted Rhodes. My successor in London was to be Ambassador Guariglia. It was agreed that after a month's rest on Ischia, I would return to London to seek the approval of the government and Her Majesty the Queen for Guariglia. In the meantime, the Spanish Civil War had broken out, and in mid-September I was invited by Ciano to bring forward my return to London to expedite the approval process for my successor. News of my recall had already leaked, and the British press had not failed to express its sincere regret at my impending departure from London. It was customary for an ambassador, at the end of his mission, to pay a farewell visit to his colleagues. However, time was running short, and I decided to take advantage of the first meeting of the "Committee for Non-Intervention in Spain" to bid farewell to my colleagues. The conference, attended by representatives from 27 states, convened by the British government and chaired by Foreign Secretary Eden, took place at the Foreign Office, in the large hall known as the "Locarno Room." I had already handed over the Embassy's affairs to Counselor Guido Crolla, who was seated at the long conference table. Just as I was entering, the Chargé d'Affaires of Soviet Russia, named Cahgan, had risen to speak. Using harsh, offensive, and violent language, he began attacking Italy, urging the conference to condemn our country for its actions in support of the Spanish nationalists. I did not hesitate for a moment to ask Counselor Crolla to give me his seat, and I immediately requested the floor. I spoke for about an hour, improvising in English and responding to the Communist representative with words no less harsh and no less severe than those he had used against my country and my government. That, I believe, was the first time since the Congress of Vienna that accredited diplomats had used such blunt and harsh language at an international conference table.

On the very same day, the London newspapers provided extensive coverage of the speeches, taking care to emphasize the dramatic tone in which the Conference had unfolded. The Italian newspapers did the same in their evening editions. Mussolini called me personally from Rome and asked if I had already submitted the request for approval of Ambassador Guariglia. I replied that I had not yet been able to do so, having been prevented from doing so the previous day at the conference at the Foreign Office, but that I would do so that very day. Mussolini replied: “Don’t do it anymore. You remain ambassador in London.”

dynamic, so as to compel London and Paris to recognize the empire and to resume their old relations with Rome on a new basis.[18] A program, as can be seen, not fundamentally different from Mussolini’s, but which, in the hands of a man like him—lacking actual diplomatic experience and “exalted”—inevitably tended to take on a dynamism, a crudeness, and a self-assurance (even though Ciano was personally insecure) that it certainly would not have had in other hands and that could even influence Mussolini. This was all the more true given the particular psychological and ideological phase that, as we have seen, the “Duce” was going through.

In the summer of 1932, when Mussolini had removed him from Palazzo Chigi, Grandi had devoted two hundred pages of his diary to reflections on the three years during which he had steered Italian foreign policy, on how he conceived of it, on what he had been able to do and not do, on his collaboration with the “Duce,” and on their differing ways of viewing and approaching international relations. Essential for understanding Grandi’s personality and the foreign policy he would have liked to see implemented by Fascism, as well as the substance of the Grandi–Mussolini relationship, these pages[19] provide a wealth of factual details and valuable insights into the psychological mindset with which the “Duce” approached foreign policy issues and how his modus agendi was largely shaped by this psychological mindset. Among other things, Grandi wrote:

Mussolini’s entire foreign policy is rooted in “subjective states of mind,” in his complex and complicated psychology.

One cannot be a dictator outside one’s own country. Unless one wages war. But he cannot wage war, even though that is his sole dream. The awareness of being “fourth” in order of importance—determined by the inescapable hierarchy of power among nations, among the representatives of Great Britain, France, and Germany (and let us not consider America and Russia for the moment)—does not sit well with him. He cannot and will not resign himself to this. He feels his pride and vanity wounded. And so he prefers to abandon the game of the giants and join the game of the children—that is, the Small Powers, which, simply because they are smaller, bow—or rather, pretend to bow, because they do not forget, quite the contrary, the game of the giants!—before him....

In three years, Mussolini has never told me what his plan, his strategy, or his foreign policy guidelines were or are. Perhaps he doesn’t have any...

He does not know, does not care about, and does not understand the difficult art of negotiation. He regards the negotiator as a “sly fox” and nothing more. Mussolini is decisive. It is up to others to accept. In the same way, he often accepts what others decide. Black and white. He does not know the difficult art of bargaining, of contracts, of negotiation. He cannot know it. He is a Leader. And that is to say, a great Poet. But the Nation, alongside the Leader, needs a good administrator who will manage the Nation’s affairs well.

Furthermore, Mussolini views the entire world, international issues, etc., etc., through a distorted lens.

He is at the center. Everything either originates with him or leads back to him. No, the world is different. The proportions and the paths are different.

It may be that direct involvement in diplomatic affairs gives him a sense of both the small and the grand realities that make up everyday life—the life of human beings. The life of a man and a people without Poetry is no life at all. But life is not made up of Poetry alone.

From 1922 to 1929, despite these character flaws and this conception of international relations—which, moreover, were not yet fully developed in him and were partly offset by a still-vivid human curiosity about his interactions with foreign diplomats—Mussolini had been able to steer Italian foreign policy without too much difficulty or damage. At a time when the international landscape was essentially static and when, for the "Duce," foreign policy was still completely subordinate to domestic policy, it was, in fact, ultimately a matter of steering it almost exclusively in the wake of British policy, venturing at most into the waters of the "children" (Albania, Greece, Yugoslavia). The weight of Mussolini's limitations became more evident in the following years—especially after 1932, when Grandi's departure from Palazzo Chigi deprived him of a skilled and realistic "administrator"—as the international landscape became less static and foreign policy took on ever greater importance for him. Until the war in Ethiopia, however, Mussolini had been able to steer the ship fairly well, all things considered. The Ethiopian campaign had, in many respects, upended the terms on which Italian foreign policy had been based until then. The "Duce," with the almost unanimous and wholehearted support of a large part of the "career" diplomats, of Suvich and Grandi, had on the whole still managed to steer the ship, even though his entire policy was based essentially on an intuition bordering on a gamble—one that, however, had proved successful and thus constituted a masterpiece for him, marking, at the time, a clear turning point in the internal history of the regime. Nor, even though its traditional basic terms had been disrupted in many respects, can it be said that Italian foreign policy had emerged from the Ethiopian conflict irrevocably condemned to a radical change of course. Such a possibility was in fact rejected by Mussolini, who—not coincidentally—immediately sought—as we have seen[20]—to somehow reopen discussions with France and, above all, did not at all dismiss the idea of an agreement with England, even though he conceived of it not as a mere return to the relations that existed prior to the Ethiopian crisis, but as a general agreement that would place the two countries on an equal footing in the Mediterranean and in a privileged relationship from which, over time, he believed France would have to pay the price. And, more importantly, this possibility was not ruled out even by a far from negligible segment of the British conservative political class, which—as we shall see shortly —although it had lost much of its confidence in Mussolini's good faith, was nevertheless convinced that an agreement with him would have to be reached, even if it was firmly resolved to do so on its own terms and not on those of the "Duce," and certain that he, in the end, would be unable to refuse it.

Given this reality—which, in turn, was part of a rapidly deteriorating international situation (and which, moreover, had largely come about as a direct result of Mussolini's initiative in Ethiopia)—it would be more necessary than ever for a man of great diplomatic experience to steer the helm of Italian foreign policy, someone capable of keeping emotions and resentments in check and of negotiating everything; willing to abide by the rules and timelines of negotiation without succumbing to impatience or hysteria, and above all, to be content with what had already been achieved and with the little that might still be attainable, and to accept returning to that role of "fourth party" which—despite the success achieved in Ethiopia—continued to be (and increasingly so) Italy's lot. Speculating on whether or not such a man existed within the Fascist leadership is, from a historical standpoint, practically pointless: even if he had existed, it is clear that, given Mussolini's personality and the reality of the regime, he would have had no chance of being entrusted with the leadership of foreign policy. What is certain, however, is that neither Mussolini nor Ciano were men of that sort.

Mussolini, the “leader,” despite having been in direct contact with foreign policy over the past four years (and what years they were!), not only had failed to gain from it the sense of international reality that Grandi had hoped it might provide him, but, on the contrary, had multiplied and exacerbated his previous limitations: egocentrism; a reliance on the certainty of his own intuitions rather than on a thoughtful analysis of reality and the various possibilities that might arise from it; impatience to see those possibilities realized and, consequently, intolerance and contempt for negotiation; distrust of his ambassadors (whom he considered inevitably “indigenized,” that is, corrupted by the political environment of the country where they were based and, therefore, unreliable21), the inability to accept even the mere suggestion of a setback, the almost hysterical irritability—often boiling over into retaliation—due to the “misunderstanding” his policies faced and the criticism and attacks (especially from the press) directed at him. All of this was exacerbated by the interference of his psychological regression and the crystallization of his idea of the “new civilization.” Nor was Ciano, who in that situation should have been the “good administrator” of the nation’s affairs, any better. Some of Mussolini’s limitations were also his own; others, especially in the early days, he absorbed from Mussolini through a process of admiring identification reminiscent of the mimicry of certain animals; still others stemmed from his status as a “heir apparent” seeking self-affirmation. Over time, some of these limitations would be corrected, and Ciano would gradually become more critical of his father-in-law’s shortcomings and his policies, even seeking to modify them. But aside from the fact that, by the time Ciano realized he had been “deceived” by the Germans, the situation was already too compromised to be truly rectified, convincing Mussolini to make a complete about-face was a feat that neither Ciano nor anyone else could accomplish. Even so, the personal drama of Ciano’s gradual estrangement from his father-in-law cannot be ignored and constitutes one of the most humanly

21 D. Grandi wrote on this subject, recalling the seven years he spent as ambassador in London: “I knew from experience how limited—if not nonexistent—the influence was that our diplomatic missions exerted on the decisions Mussolini made in Rome. He did not like to consult anyone, least of all diplomats, whom he despised and distrusted. He regarded diplomats simply as an inevitable evil, as figures fatally “corrupted” by the political environment of the foreign country in which they resided; “indigenized,” as he called them. Suspicious of everything and everyone, he was inclined to dismiss their judgments and information out of hand. He took pleasure whenever he could prove that they had made an erroneous assessment, thereby demonstrating that he had adopted a course of action opposite to the one they had recommended. Giving Mussolini advice meant running the risk that he would do the opposite. This happened almost always, and it created constant—and often irresolvable—moral dilemmas for the head of the diplomatic mission abroad, who was eager to serve his country and achieve a specific goal in its interest. When the ambassador sent a dispatch to Mussolini, he always faced a twofold dilemma: the issue of the information itself and the far more delicate and difficult question of how that information was presented, with the aim of eliciting in Mussolini the “reaction” most likely to induce him to follow a specific course of action. Between a report from an ambassador and one from an anonymous informant, he would, nine times out of ten, not hesitate to trust the latter. Foreign capitals were teeming with these greedy, mediocre, irresponsible people—the “trusted” informants sent by Mussolini. They corresponded with him personally through direct and secret channels. Their power was extraordinary and dangerous. Instead of cooperating with the diplomatic missions, their main activity boiled down to constantly monitoring the work of those missions—and above all, their “loyalty”—creating a perpetual state of unease that was by no means unjustified. Uncovering the informant and, if possible, reaching an understanding with him to prevent him from causing harm was one of the head of mission’s greatest concerns. “Mussolini did not divide officials into capable and incapable, but rather into loyal and disloyal” (D. Grandi, Memoirs). This attitude of Mussolini’s was not new. As early as January 1932, speaking with G. Giuriati, he had vented his

frustration against diplomacy: “Now is a time of waiting, but we are heading toward war. I need to overhaul the entire diplomatic corps; the current one is inadequate for the task and perhaps even worse… None, or almost none, of our ambassadors are up to the task. Even at the lower ranks, there are serious shortcomings… I need representatives who represent not just any Italy, but Fascist Italy.” In the G. Giuriati Archive, notes from the conversation with Mussolini on January 11, 1932.

While these may be among the most interesting and dramatic episodes in the “petite histoire” of the regime’s final years, from a historical perspective, what truly matters for an assessment of Ciano are his early years at Palazzo Chigi. And on this point, the judgment could not be more negative: Not only did Ciano fail to exert (or even attempt to exert) any restraining influence on Mussolini, but he played a leading role in making Italian foreign policy more adventurous and aggressive and in pushing the “Duce” to overcome certain reservations and uncertainties in committing to certain operations regarding which his “sense of limits” tended to be more acute than that of his son-in-law.

Consistent with his conviction that a less timid and more dynamic stance toward Germany was necessary to make Italian foreign policy more incisive and astute, as soon as he was appointed foreign minister, Ciano, on the one hand, adopted a less conciliatory stance toward France and England than Mussolini and Sùvich (and Grandi in London) had maintained in the preceding weeks, and responded to inquiries from Paris and London aimed at ascertaining Italy’s true intentions with a series of preliminary conditions: he refused to participate in the Montreux Conference on the Straits because “until the sanctions are lifted and justice is done, Italy will refrain from any form of international cooperation”; and as for the conference of the Locarno Pact countries, he made Italian participation contingent on Germany’s participation and on the abrogation of the Mediterranean agreements concluded by England during the Ethiopian crisis with Turkey, Greece, and Yugoslavia; it called for the closure of the legations in Addis Ababa and the revocation of Ethiopia’s representation at the League of Nations, making it clear that it sought full and prompt recognition of the Empire; and, finally, it made no secret of the fact that, for Rome, the European question was inseparable from the Mediterranean one and therefore had to be resolved simultaneously if Italy was to resume its traditional policy of continental cooperation.[22] On the other hand, it increasingly stepped up efforts to revise relations with Germany, first by giving the green light to the Austro-German agreement of July 11 and making Italy’s participation in negotiations for a new Locarno Pact contingent on Germany’s, and then—especially after the League of Nations Assembly had recognized the validity of Ethiopia’s representation for the current session on September 2323

23 The reconfirmation of Ethiopia’s seat (pushed for above all by a group of smaller countries) aroused the keenest irritation in Rome, all the more so because during a visit to the Italian capital, the Secretary-General of the League of Nations, Avenol, had raised hopes for a very different resolution of the issue. One consequence of this was certainly the decision to demand that the new French ambassador—De Chambrun’s successor—present his credentials to the “King of Italy and Emperor”—while intensifying contacts and overtures with Berlin, culminating in the third decade of October with a personal official visit to Germany by the foreign minister who had been in office since Hitler came to power.

With this tactic, Ciano undoubtedly achieved some results, such as the termination of the British Mediterranean agreements and the closure of the legations in Addis Ababa. However, he failed to make any real progress with Paris and, above all, with London.

Despite the presence in the government of L. Blum and the Popular Front, Paris would not have viewed a rapprochement with Rome unfavorably. The Quai d’Orsay in particular (but also military circles), following the remilitarization of the Rhineland, would have been interested not only in a new Locarno

Pact but also in the conclusion of a Mediterranean pact in which Italy would also participate, with the aim, on the one hand, to keep it in check and, on the other, to initiate an initial, effective détente that could then be extended to the continent itself. And such a pact could also have been accepted by the French government, which could have justified its agreement with "the Fascists who murdered Matteotti" by invoking the higher interests of peace, reconciliation among all peoples, and the strengthening of collective security—principles that Blum had laid as the foundation of his foreign policy in the policy statement he delivered to the Senate on June 23.[24] England, however, was hostile to the Mediterranean pact because it was convinced—not without reason[25]—that Italy would take advantage of it to begin negotiating with England a part of the general agreement and because, as we shall see shortly, at that time it was opposed to any agreement with Rome. In this situation, it is clear that the France of the Popular Front could not be any more "realistic" than conservative England."

London's position was much more firm, though ultimately more short-sighted.27 There, the majority of the government, a large part of the military leadership (especially in the navy), and even more so the Foreign Office, insisted on "Ethiopia"—that is, that France proceed with the de jure recognition of the Empire. And upon his return from his trip to Germany, Ciano made it clear to De Chambrun that if—contrary to the laudable intentions "to breathe new life into Franco-Italian friendship"—he had been led to act as he did, it was precisely as a result of the unexpected vote in Geneva. See DDF, vol. II, III, pp. 625 ff.

25 On October 10, speaking with the French journalist Pierre Dupuy, Mussolini declared himself willing to conclude a Mediterranean agreement, but said that his intention was to achieve a balance of power in that sea with England. See DDF, vol. II, III, p. 500.

Eden, in particular, was absolutely opposed to any concessions to Italy. The war in Ethiopia—and even more so the "white war" between Italy and England that had unfolded in parallel with the former in the Mediterranean—plunged not only British prestige into crisis but also imperial communications and the security of British positions in one of the most vital nerve centers of the imperial system, starkly revealing the unpreparedness andbackwardness of the British defense system and throwing it into disarray by forcing upon it the harsh reality of a third front never before considered—and, moreover, located where London had until then believed to be the fastest and safest transit point between the other two fronts[28]—had produced such a shock that it led everyone to reconsider their previous judgments on Italy, on Mussolini, and on how to deal with them. Eden, probably the most prominent advocate of a hard line toward Italy, explained the reasons for his intransigence in his memoirs[29]:

The League's repeal of sanctions gave many hope that good relations between Italy and Great Britain could be reestablished. The argument often put forward was that, if only we had made a concession to the Duce, he would have reciprocated and our relations would soon have improved. I had little confidence that things would turn out that way because the reasoning seemed to me to be based on a misinterpretation of Mussolini's character. To me, he was a hard-nosed and shrewd opportunist who would have regarded concessions as a sign of weakness and who cared nothing at all for the principles of the League or the Stresa Front. He would have thrown his support behind whichever side seemed to offer him the greatest advantages. We could not, for moral and practical reasons, enter into such a competition or offer him the spoils he sought; it was therefore inevitable that Hitler and Mussolini would draw closer to one another. The Duce had made his choice between the African adventure and European stability. He abandoned Austria when he marched on Abyssinia... I therefore believed that our attitude toward Rome should consist of cautious overtures. We had to demonstrate goodwill but not yield on vital interests, nor count on Fascism's respect for its promises once they ceased to serve its purposes.

From an analytical standpoint, there is much truth in these words. What is true above all is what is implied in the last sentence: any agreement for Mussolini would have been an armistice. In the "Duce's" historical-political conception, sooner or later Italy would have turned against England anyway. There is no doubt about this; yet it is impossible to overlook two issues: the duration of this armistice—which would certainly have been lengthy—and, consequently, what would have happened in the "post-Mussolini" era, namely, whether the "Duce's" successors would have remained faithful to his historical-political vision. Even a moderate and staunch anti-Nazi like Grandi—who viewed a rapprochement with Germany solely as a tactical ploy to force London to "come to terms" with Rome and Berlin and subsequently "accept the concrete advantages of an agreement with Italy" —the goal he most sought and which he would have liked to achieve himself—considered this provisional "agreement" in 1936 (or, at any rate, deemed it appropriate to propose to Rome) to be an armistice. Proof of this is a very long letter (twenty-six pages) he wrote to Ciano from London on November 6, 1936, to explain the political situation in England in the wake of his trip to Germany and to inform him, with undisguised satisfaction, of the failure—one blunder after another—that Ribbentrop's mission to England was heading toward. In it[31], we read, among other things:

As for Italy, and the issue of Italian-British relations, no one in England now harbors the slightest illusion that they can return to what they were before 1935. Nor do the British harbor excessive illusions about the possibility of winning Italy back to a potential anti-German bloc. From the Battle of Trafalgar to the "white war" between Italy and England in 1935–36 in the Mediterranean and Africa, the British geographical, political, and military conception of Italy for a century had been as follows: "the Kingdom of Naples extended northward." After the defeat that Mussolini inflicted on England in 1935–36, the latter—making a truly remarkable effort at readjustment given the slow-witted and obtuse mentality of its people—suddenly and hastily "realized" (as they say here) the new geographical, political, and military conception of Mussolini's Italy. England has fully realized that the Italian Empire in Ethiopia is the Italian Empire on the Mediterranean. I sincerely believe that, at least up to now, the reason for the hasty and rushed rearmament of British naval bases in the Mediterranean is not due to a preconceived plan for a possible rematch against Italy (these people have come to think too much like the Turks of the 19th-century Ottoman Empire to conceive of such a proud and dangerous plan) but rather to an actual "fear" of finding themselves unprepared in the face of what the majority of Britons consider to be the inevitable forward march of the Fascist Revolution—namely, complete domination of the Mediterranean. These people are making a conspicuous effort to show that they have overcome the bitterness of their defeat and are willing to accept the concrete advantages of an agreement with Italy—an agreement that, however, can only be based on a plan of historical provisionality. In short, it is an armistice, not peace. We are slowly and laboriously making our way toward this armistice, moving sideways, advancing three steps and retreating two; but we are moving toward it because we have no choice.

30 On November 6, 1936, Grandi wrote to Ciano on this subject: "... if Italy and Germany increasingly demonstrate to England that they constitute a compact bloc—without cracks, without blind spots, without any temptation to exploit the other's difficulties for their own advantage—determined to follow a common course and present a united front to the other Powers, British policy will be forced to come to terms with Rome and Berlin simultaneously—that is, to accept the conditions that Rome and Berlin, in agreement, will dictate to London to guarantee and maintain in Europe and throughout the world the peace that alone allows the British Empire to remain, with great difficulty, united and alive" (D. Grandi Archive, b. 40, file 92, subfile 2, ins. 2).

31 Ibid. This passage is among those that Grandi would cite on November 18 in his report to the Grand

Council to account for his actions within the Committee for Non-Intervention in Spain.

The more Italy and Germany demonstrate to England that they are united, the more England will be forced to come to terms with the two great Fascist nations.

You explained this with extraordinary effectiveness to the Führer.

The protocols signed between you and Hitler must indeed be regarded as the new great lever that the Duce has placed beneath this old, creaking Europe.

Where Eden is no longer telling the truth—or, at best, passing off his convictions as British policy—is when he leads one to believe that the latter has been consistent with the former. In reality, British policy toward Italy between 1936 and 1940 always sought, albeit with ups and downs, an agreement with Rome (as Grandi rightly wrote in his memoirs: "British policy effectively abandoned the possibility of reaching an understanding with Germany, with Hitler, and with Nazism only definitively after March 15, 1939—that is, after the treacherous coup in Prague. It did not abandon the hope of reaching an understanding with Mussolini until June 10, 1940") and was not based at all on the assumption that no concessions should be made to Mussolini on fundamental issues because he would not honor the agreements, but because the government—and even more so the Foreign Office—was convinced: a) that, for the time being, Italy was unable to act because it first had to consolidate its conquered positions; b) that this period of time would allow England to complete its rearmament; c) that an agreement could be reached with Hitler that would completely isolate Mussolini; d) that Mussolini, in any case, would never go so far as to bind himself indissolubly to Hitler and that the Italian-German rapprochement was merely a tactical maneuver to put pressure on London and Paris; e) that Italy could therefore be brought back into the fold without substantial concessions, without a general agreement, and, for some, even without recognition of the Empire. The documentation available today speaks volumes in this regard and reveals the British position to be far more complex than it appears in Eden's memoirs.[32]

32 Another lengthy letter from Grandi to Ciano, dated December 15, 1936 (ibid.), indirectly suggests the possibility that, in the second half of 1936, the issue of relations with Italy was, to some extent, linked in the eyes of the British Conservative government to that of Edward VIII's continued reign (with whom Grandi had an excellent personal relationship). According to Grandi, Baldwin and the cabinet had been opposed to the monarch and had maneuvered to force him to abdicate, essentially to defend "the policy of the current Conservative Party, which King Edward had declared and shown himself willing to directly challenge and attack." "King Edward, first as Prince of Wales and later as King, had effectively become the standard-bearer and the hope to whom not only the British masses but also all those in England looked with confidence—those who are convinced that to save or at least halt the Empire's historical decline, it will be necessary to break definitively with the now-powerless and corroded democratic tradition and courageously embrace, even in England, the Revolution of the 20th Century. King Edward was rightly regarded, for the principles that

Particularly important for the purposes of our discussion is the British conviction—also present among the French, though all things considered in less deeply rooted and increasingly problematic forms[33]—that Mussolini would never truly align himself with Hitler. For the British embassy in Rome, this was a given from which everything else followed. In a comprehensive report dated September 19 on Italian-British relations, Counselor Ingram theorized it as follows[34]:

The “feminine” side of Italian foreign policy—its flirtation with Germany—while never going so far as to compromise Italy’s position vis-à-vis other potential partners, has never succeeded, at least as far as we have seen so far, in achieving substantial results that would justify the conclusion that where the interests of the two countries run parallel, corresponding action must necessarily follow. And nothing has happened to suggest that Italy has lost its freedom to maneuver without being bound by commitments to Berlin.

Not even Ciano’s visit to Germany in October succeeded in truly denting this optimism. As French Ambassador De Chambrun telegraphed to Paris on October 24, Drummond believed that the visit, despite the importance attached to it in Rome and Berlin, would certainly not yield any truly substantial results.[35] Nor was the view any different in London. As the French ambassador in London reported to the Quai d’Orsay after a meeting with Assistant Under-Secretary Sargent (who was particularly involved in relations with Italy), at the Foreign Office, despite the hostility characterizing their mutual relations, the “quarrel” with Italy was not taken “too seriously,” and it was believed that “in the long run,” direct talks with Rome would resolve “disputes that are not of vital importance to either country.”[36]

As can be seen, London had fully understood the tactics of Mussolini and Ciano (who, moreover, with their periodic overtures for an agreement[37] certainly failed to conceal them well) and, apparently, he openly presented himself—wrongly, due to character flaws he had not yet revealed—as the man of this great, future, and possible revolution... In recent months, in particular, the two words “King-Dictator” have been uttered with such frequency that they could not fail to cause deep concern within the Conservative Party. The latter, which has in Baldwin its typical representative and recognized leader, was lying in wait for the King, determined to take a big gamble to rid itself of this troublesome monarch, whose indisputable popularity among the British masses made the future of democratic and liberal conservatism problematic or even dangerous.”

33 See DDF, vols. II, III, pp. 74 ff. (report by Charles-Roux noting Pius XI’s similar conviction, though he changed his mind after Ciano’s first visit to Germany), 164 ff., 603 ff., 631 ff., and esp. 634 ff., 658 ff. According to Ambassador De Chambrun (ibid., pp. 576 ff.), Mussolini’s true objective was a directorate of the “responsible” great powers along the lines of the Four-Power Pact.

They had fully adapted to it. Every now and then, they could make a small concession to Mussolini to satisfy his pride a little and help him get over his disappointment and irritation, but a real agreement was out of the question. At least for the time being, since in the end Mussolini would return to the fold. And time would take care of the rest: the “Duce” was certainly not immortal, and once he was gone, the situation would become clear. It was with this logic that the gentlemen’s agreement of January 2, 1937, was concluded. The manner in which it was brought about—and above all the timing, following Ciano’s visit to Germany and the speech in Milan in which Mussolini explicitly spoke of a “Rome-Berlin Axis”—are extremely significant.

Until around the end of August, Mussolini and Ciano had, in a sense, waited for Italy’s rapprochement with Germany to begin producing its first effects in Paris and London. In early September, faced with silence from France and, above all, from Britain, the “Duce” had begun to show the first signs of impatience and irritation and had instructed Grandi to adopt an intransigent stance on the Spanish question.[38] The evident British attempts to reach a direct agreement with Hitler and the League of Nations vote on September 23 had subsequently pushed Italian irritation to its peak and prompted Ciano to take a new and more dramatic step toward Berlin. This set in motion the chain of events that led Ciano to Berlin and Berchtesgaden on October 20–24.[39] In Berlin, the Foreign Minister

38 On September 5, Mussolini had written the following letter to the ambassador in London: “Dear Grandi, The latest summer developments in British politics have all, whether intentionally or not, been anti-Italian in nature.

c) the King’s voyage in the Adriatic and the Eastern Mediterranean, without calling at any Italian port, even though he used the port of Brindisi for the royal mail. The press in Belgrade and Ankara interpreted the voyage as a display of anti-Italian sentiment.

b) The King’s visit to Atatürk.

c) Samuel Hoare’s trip to the Mediterranean and Malta.

d) The suppression of the Italian language in Malta with the stroke of a pen.

e) The failure of trade negotiations due to Great Britain’s exorbitant demands. /) Agreements with Egypt, primarily aimed at opposing Italy.

g) Reports regarding the establishment of a British naval base in the Adriatic.

“All this comes as no surprise, but it requires us to adopt a similar course of action, beginning with the meetings of the so-called ‘Control Committee’ for non-‘interference in Spain,’ in which Committee—if it is formed—we must not make the slightest concession to the views of Great Britain and France” (D. Grandi Archive, b. 42, file 103, subfile 2).

39 The visit was covered by the Italian press with the utmost prominence, as if to demonstrate that it was not merely a routine diplomatic initiative, while at the same time giving Ciano a prominence that did not fail to strike the most attentive observers of the regime’s affairs: as if the intention were to establish him in everyone’s eyes as the “heir apparent.” A telling example is what Ambassador De Chambrun wrote to Paris as early as October 20: “The personal dictatorship inaugurated by Mr. Mussolini in 1922 had never, until now, tolerated any man rising to such prominence as to stand out from the mass of lieutenants designated to serve the ‘Leader.’” The two most striking examples in this regard were those of Mr. Grandi and Marshal Balbo, both of whom had risen from the ranks of the early loyalists, but whose very successes led to their removal quite soon... This “leveling,” applied to figures who, as an Italian, had met with his colleague von Neurath and signed a secret protocol of cooperation between the two governments. The highlight of the trip, however, had been a meeting in Berchtesgaden with Hitler, during which Ciano had handed the Führer a dossier of thirty-two documents compiled by the Foreign Office to document “The German Danger” (with an introduction by Eden that was extremely harsh and contemptuous toward Germany and Hitler)—which Grandi had managed to obtain in early September through his personal channels—a dossier with which Ciano intended to counter the British overtures toward Berlin.[40] On the same day, the German government had announced its de jure recognition of the Italian Empire.

In practical political terms, the trip (though the British could not have known this) had not yielded significant results; the secret protocol of cooperation either reaffirmed things that were already a fait accompli or was quite vague; yet even for those familiar with Mussolini’s modus operandi, it did have some significance. Nevertheless, at first it made very little impression in London. But on November 1, Mussolini delivered his speech in Milan—a speech entirely focused on foreign policy[41]—in which the “Duce,” after dismissing disarmament, collective security, and indivisible peace as illusions and

reiterating his criticisms of the League of Nations, examined Italy's relations with a number of European countries. The focus of the speech, however, had been on Germany and England. Regarding relations with the former, he had said:

The meetings in Berlin resulted in an understanding between the two countries on certain issues, some of which are particularly pressing at this time. But these agreements—which were enshrined in specific, duly signed minutes—this Berlin-Rome axis, is not a barrier; rather, it is an axis around which, as Grandi and Balbo gained too much prominence both in Italy and abroad, it operated with the same rigor in the realm of strict domestic politics, where successive purges of Fascist Party secretaries, federal secretaries, and ministers, undersecretaries of state, and mayors, periodically demonstrated that it was the privilege of one man alone to endure and to reign supreme in the exercise of power. Such a resolve was, moreover, significantly cemented by the adoption of the provisions issued in 1932, under which only the King and Mr. Mussolini are entitled to acclamations.

"Now, it seems increasingly evident that an exception to this rule has been established in favor of Count Ciano... The very clear impression is that while this enthusiasm [for Ciano] was directed toward the courageous aviator of the Ethiopian War, it was also—and above all—directed toward the potential heir to the dictatorship. The publicity given to these events, both through the press and through the cinema, testifies in any case that these signs of popularity are regarded as part of the family legacy and cast no shadow on those in high places. And they must therefore be interpreted, because I do not believe that, despite everything, Count Ciano himself has yet gained popular favor to such an extent, other than as a sort of familial reflection" (DDF, vol. II, III, pp. 547 ff.).....

to which all European states motivated by a desire for cooperation and peace can contribute.

Germany, although approached and urged, has not joined the sanctions. With the agreement of July 11, a source of discord between Berlin and Rome has disappeared, and I remind you that, even before the Berlin meeting, Germany had practically recognized the Roman Empire.

From there, after discussing fascism's anti-communism—almost as if to imply that this was what underpinned relations with Germany—he moved on to relations with England:

So far, I have focused on the continent. Italians must gradually adopt an insular mindset, because that is the only way to properly address the issues of the nation's naval defense.

Italy is an island immersed in the Mediterranean. This sea—and here I am also addressing the British, who may be listening to the radio at this very moment—this sea is, for Great Britain, a road, one of many roads, or rather a shortcut by which the British Empire reaches its outlying territories more quickly... While for others the Mediterranean is a route, for us Italians it is life itself. We have said a thousand times—and I repeat before this magnificent gathering—that we do not intend to threaten this route. We do not seek to block it, but we demand, on the other hand, that our own vital rights and interests be respected as well.

There are no alternatives: the thinking minds of the British Empire must realize that the fact is a fait accompli and irrevocable. The sooner this happens, the better.

A bilateral clash is unthinkable, and even less so is a clash that would immediately escalate from bilateral to European. There is therefore only one solution: a frank, swift, and comprehensive agreement based on the recognition of mutual interests. But if this were not the case—if, in fact, which

I rule out as of today, there were truly plans to suffocate the life of the Italian people in that sea that was once the Sea of Rome—then let it be known that the Italian people would rise as one, ready for battle with a resolve that would have few precedents in history.

And a week later, Mussolini had further clarified his thoughts in an interview with Ward Price for the *Daily Mail*[42]. What he had in mind was not a non-aggression pact ("I do not wish to further exacerbate the 'pact mania' that has recently raged"), but more simply a gentlemen's agreement:

Anglo-Italian interests in the Mediterranean are not antagonistic but complementary. Neither Britain nor Italy can afford the luxury of being hostile toward the other in that sea. The agreement should therefore ensure the safeguarding of Anglo-Italian interests in the Mediterranean; it should consequently be bilateral, and its nature should be such as to completely reassure the other Mediterranean states. Finding a formula to bring this agreement to life is not difficult; but a necessary prelude to such a formula is the new atmosphere that is taking shape. This new atmosphere justifies the conviction that a new chapter is about to begin in the history of relations between our two countries.

It was only after these two statements by Mussolini that London began to take action—probably driven more by the hopes that Mussolini's speech had aroused in broad sectors of British public opinion than by genuine conviction. On November 13, following a series of contacts and statements in London and Rome aimed at better gauging Italian intentions and making it clear from the outset that the Mediterranean was of equal importance to both countries, Eden gave the go-ahead for preparations for negotiations. A memorandum he drafted that same day for the Foreign Office clearly reveals the spirit that animated him:

If no further response is given to Mr. Mussolini's overtures, he will undoubtedly revert to the suspicions and animosities of the past eighteen months and will make use, with increased vigor, of the numerous tools at his disposal to turn the negative potential of Italian politics to our detriment. Among these will be ever-greater collaboration and understanding with Germany, which will be exploited not only to our detriment but, ultimately, to our peril. A prompt, prudent, and generous response, on the other hand, could foster a détente in the Mediterranean while British rearmament is underway... It is of paramount importance that we demonstrate our strength. We must continue all our preparations in the Mediterranean on a scale with which Italy cannot easily compete. This will impress not only the Mediterranean countries but also Germany, and will diminish Italy's appeal in the eyes of the Germans. Subject to this consideration, the balance of arguments seems to tip in favor of a friendly approach. The lack of trust that Italy inspires is a reason for caution rather than inaction. It may also be assumed that as our rearmament proceeds and our military and naval power grows, it will become increasingly advantageous for Italy to maintain and strengthen cooperative relations with Great Britain, once these have been reestablished on an appropriate basis.[43]

In the days that followed, two further impetus for opening formal negotiations came from the worsening situation in Spain (particularly regarding the Italian presence in the Balearic Islands) and from reports concerning the imminent signing of an "anti-communist" agreement between Germany and Japan.

Having begun in Rome on December 5, the actual negotiations proceeded, on the whole, fairly smoothly and quickly.[44] The British aimed for a formally conciliatory agreement, limited to the Mediterranean and one that was not

44 See, regarding these negotiations, Carte Lancellotti, 148: "Gentlemen's agreement"; as well as A.

Eden, Memorie cit., I, pp. 29 ff. and in particular, pp. 41 ff., but above all P. Brundu Olla, L'equilibrio difficile. Great Britain, Italy, and France in the Mediterranean (1930–1937), Milan 1980, pp. 99 ff.

that would be too demanding for them or, worse, pave the way for subsequent, more far-reaching agreements. They were absolutely unwilling to touch on the Ethiopian and domestic issues, which would have led the talks to address the question of recognition of the Empire. The only things that mattered to them were obtaining a formal assurance from Italy that it had no designs on the Balearic Islands and the cessation of anti-British propaganda in the Middle East. And, as a secondary consideration, to somehow include France in the agreement as well, primarily to allay the fears aroused in Paris by the news of the negotiations. As soon as they realized that Ciano was attempting to broaden the talks to Anglo-Italian relations in general and was opposed to involving France in the agreement in any way, however, they immediately narrowed their demands to the issue of the Balearic Islands alone. And having obtained a formal assurance that there had been no negotiations to alter the status quo in the western Mediterranean and that "as far as Italy is concerned, the current territorial integrity of Spain must remain intact and unaltered under all circumstances," they saw no further obstacles to concluding the agreement. On January 2, 1937, the gentlemen's agreement was signed:

The Government of Italy and the Government of His Majesty the United Kingdom;

motivated by the desire to contribute increasingly, in the general interest of peace and security, to the improvement of relations between themselves and among all the Mediterranean Powers, and determined to respect the rights and interests of those Powers;

recognize that freedom of entry, exit, and transit in the Mediterranean is a vital interest for both Italy and the various parts of the British Empire, and that these interests are in no way conflicting; rule out any intention to alter, or, as far as they are concerned, to see altered, the status quo regarding the national sovereignty of the territories in the Mediterranean basin;

undertake to respect their mutual interests and rights in that area;

agree to use every possible means to prevent any activity that might harm the good relations that this declaration is intended to strengthen.

This declaration is intended for the purposes of peace and is not directed against any power.

It is not difficult to understand why, despite its vagueness, the agreement suited Mussolini and, above all, Ciano. In terms of prestige, it effectively enshrined British recognition that Italy had interests in the Mediterranean that were just as vital as those of England. In terms of foreign policy, for better or worse, it opened a small door to possible future negotiations of a more "general" nature and, for the time being, strengthened Italy's position vis-à-vis Germany[45] and could serve as a calling card with those Mediterranean countries that had aligned themselves with England in 1935–36, and first and foremost with Yugoslavia, with which, as we shall see, Ciano was preparing to establish a new type of relationship in order to use it as a means of containing Germany's push toward the southeast. Finally, on the domestic political front, it lent itself perfectly to allaying the fears and hostilities aroused in large sectors of the country—and within the regime itself—by the rapprochement with Germany and the first overt signs of aid to the Spanish Nationalists. And all this without tying their hands in any way.

45 Although Rome kept Berlin informed of the negotiations, it is highly telling that the Germans, at least initially, harbored concerns about the true scope of the gentlemen's agreement, to the point that

Ribbentrop even sought to sound out Grandi on this matter. See D. Grandi Archive, b. 40, file 93, subfile 2, insert 2, D. Grandi to G. Ciano, London, November 23, 1936.

The situation is more complex for the British. Given the spirit in which they had entered into the negotiations, it is clear that the agreement was acceptable to them as well. Formally, it was in fact consistent with their underlying strategy toward Italy: it imposed virtually no obligations on them, could serve to curb Italy's rapprochement with Germany, and alleviated their concerns regarding the Balearic Islands. And all this without any concession regarding the positions they had taken within the League of Nations. In reality—and this brings us back to our discussion of the British position as a whole and its short-sightedness—by acting in this way, the Foreign Office demonstrated that it had failed to realize that the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War had introduced a new element into the framework of Italian-British relations that its strategy should not have underestimated. As early as August 9, the French ambassador to the Holy See, Charles-Roux, had lucidly written to Y. Delbos that the events in Spain could constitute—as they in fact largely did—the event "that could unite Rome and Berlin against us." And he had warned: "Let us avoid providing this alliance with an opportunity to close ranks or strengthen itself."46 This applied not only to France but also to England. Indeed, it applied more to London than to Paris. Because the British were not as deeply involved as the French in the Spanish Civil War; because it was with them that Mussolini sought an agreement above all, aware that reaching one with the French was more difficult and having learned from the experience of 1935 that an agreement with Paris without one with London was of little use; because only they had the ability to dissuade him from embarking on an adventure in which, moreover, he himself, as we shall see, was reluctant to commit fully. In this situation, knowing Mussolini, London should have either rejected his overtures—whatever the cost in terms of a portion of its own public opinion—in order to force him to offer more to avoid ending up in Hitler's arms, or shown greater willingness toward him, if only for the future, in order to keep him on a tight leash. Above all, it should not have reduced the discussion on Spain during the negotiations for the gentlemen's agreement to practically just the issue of the Balearic Islands, which for Ciano and Mussolini (but not only for them) could have only one meaning: for England, what mattered was that the Spanish territorial status quo remained unchanged, while as for the rest… So much so that the first substantial deployments of Italian troops to Spain began just a few days after January 2, 1937. Allowing Mussolini to commit to Spain meant favoring Hitler, giving him a lure that not even the "Duce"—had he realized it—would have given him. As it unfolded, it seems to us that the story of the gentlemen's agreement clearly demonstrates the lack of flexibility in British policy toward Italy—its being trapped within a series of frameworks, even if justified, that rendered it short-sighted and incapable of adapting promptly to a constantly shifting reality such as that of the moment and, in particular, that of Fascist foreign policy.

That said, let us now examine what the attitude of the Fascist government and Mussolini had been up to that point toward the civil war that began in Spain on July 17, 1936, and what repercussions it had had on Italian foreign policy. For both this initial period and the subsequent ones, our discussion—as we state from the outset—will rely heavily on the recent excellent study by J. F. Coverdale, *The Italian Fascists in the Spanish Civil War*[47], which provides an intelligent and balanced account of Italian intervention in Spain, based on extensive firsthand documentation. Subsequent individual contributions and new elements we have drawn from the documentation preserved in the private archive of General Emilio Faldella, head of the SIM in Spain, may usefully supplement Coverdale's account here and there; the importance of this work, however, lies above all in having clearly highlighted the fundamental characteristics and limitations of the Italian intervention, dispelling certain statements made in the heat of the moment that for a long time distorted its contours and, to a large extent,

misrepresented its historical significance with respect to the course of Fascist foreign policy in general and Mussolini's position in particular.

Coverdale's essential contribution lies in having clarified two points: that Italy played no part whatsoever in the conception and preparation of the military uprising that sparked the civil war, and that the Italian intervention was not motivated by ideological considerations (even though these were widely exploited by the regime's propaganda for domestic purposes and, we might add, by Fascist diplomacy to put the French and, above all, the British governments in a difficult position) nor to a desire to establish a Fascist-style regime in Spain, as is generally asserted, and even less to economic considerations (which, on the other hand, weighed heavily on the German decision), but essentially to traditional political-strategic reasons. Namely, that Spain could form close political and military ties with France and that France could use Spanish territory—and in particular the Balearic Islands (on which, not coincidentally, Italian attention would later focus so heavily)—to transfer its African troops to metropolitan France in the event of war. In light of this objective, all others took a back seat and essentially remained secondary throughout. As Coverdale writes, there is no evidence to support the thesis that "during the early stages of the war, the Italians' attitude was significantly influenced by short-term plans to transform Spain into a fascist dictatorship"48. And even in the subsequent phases, plans of this kind remained vague and clearly subordinate to the objective of ensuring Franco's victory in order to exclude any French influence in Spain[49]:

Fascist ideological objectives in Spain were more negative than positive in nature: Mussolini was more concerned with preventing the success of a leftist revolution in Spain [which would have brought Franco-Spanish cooperation very close together] than with promoting fascism there. Apart from the incidents sparked by the Farinacci mission in 1937, Rome made no serious attempt to induce the Spanish Nationalists to follow the Fascist model, nor did it attempt to strengthen and support the pro-Fascist groups within the Nationalist coalition. This passive and defensive attitude did not stem from a lack of desire to see the establishment of Fascist regimes abroad... rather, it demonstrates that in Spain, traditional foreign policy factors—based on prestige and strength—and the negative ideological objective of preventing the defeat of the forces with which it had aligned itself, took precedence over the ambition to promote fascism there whenever a conflict arose between them.

Nor was this "French" perspective in assessing the Spanish situation and Italian-Spanish relations a new development at Palazzo Chigi.

Coverdale's analysis clearly shows that, up until 1931, Mussolini had shown little interest in Spain, had done nothing to encourage Primo de Rivera to transform his regime along fascist lines, and that his sole concern had been that Madrid not establish close political and military ties with Paris. The fall of the monarchy and the proclamation of the republic had made a great impression in Rome. Aside from concerns regarding the Church's stance—which, however, pertained more to Italy than to Spain[50]—there were three main concerns: that a return to parliamentary democracy would turn Spain into another hub of activity for anti-fascist exiles; that the situation might rapidly deteriorate to the exclusive advantage of "communism" and, above all, that Madrid "would be drawn deeper into the French orbit, to the detriment of Italy." After the initial shock, however, these concerns soon subsided, even earlier and more markedly than Coverdale believes. The diary of Dino Grandi, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, is quite significant in this regard.[51] On April 14, 1931, as soon as he received news of the fall of the monarchy, Grandi—anticipating the judgment Mussolini would later express in his *Aphorisms* regarding the Church's stance, but at the same time broadening the discussion to the wider context of international relations—wrote:

This is very sad news for us. The Republic in Spain probably means an alliance with France, vassalage to Paris. Does the contest that began half a century ago between Berlin and Paris end with Delcassé's victory in 1931?

For Italy, a republic in Spain means war in the Mediterranean—a war lost before it is even fought. It may mean the territorial continuity of France with its African Empire.

The clergy helped French and Spanish Freemasonry topple the Bourbon throne. The Jesuits have now struck a pact with democracy and the left everywhere. The clergy has always been the arbiter of Spain's destiny. If the King has departed, this likely means that the Spanish clergy sought the fall of the Bourbon throne.

The crux of Spain's possible future situation lies entirely here. What will the Church do? What will London have to say as well? The new situation in Spain could upset the balance in the Mediterranean to our detriment and to England's detriment. All the more reason, then, for London and Rome to work together today.

Another note from twelve days later (April 26), however, shows that Rome, once the initial euphoria had passed, was already viewing the situation with greater composure and opting for a path toward stabilizing and strengthening the Republic, clearly prioritizing considerations of classical politics over ideological prejudices:

The Duce, too, believes that the Republic is consolidating. I told him that I agree completely. Spain is, by its very nature, resistant to communism. Moreover, since the Republic is consolidating, it is better that it do so as quickly and firmly as possible. A strong Spain, whatever its internal regime may be, is likely to better resist French pressure.

The formation of the Azana government had reinforced Palazzo Chigi's stance on this issue. In the early years of the Republic, Rome's only real thorn in its side (aside from the presence of a certain number of anti-fascist exiles in Spain) had been the recurring rumors about the existence of an alleged secret agreement signed even before the revolution by French emissaries and the Spanish Republican parties, under which the latter, in exchange for substantial financial aid for their cause, would have committed to allowing the French, in the event of war, to move troops from North Africa to France and to occupy the Balearic Islands. So much so that the Italian Navy's major maneuvers in 1932 had been based precisely on this scenario. The great success of the center-right parties in the November 1933 elections had not allayed these fears. Symptomatically, however, these fears had rapidly diminished, leading to a sort of disinterest in Spain in Rome by the second half of 1934 and especially in 1935, in parallel with the improvement in relations between Rome and Paris and the signing of the Mussolini-Laval agreements. In this context, even relations with the Spanish "fascists" and with José Antonio Primo de Rivera's group had developed relatively late; they had not attained the substance and commitment of those established with similar French or British groups, and there is reason to believe that, although there was no lack of sympathy for Primo de Rivera in fascist and even diplomatic circles, the primary purpose of these relations was to counter the establishment of privileged Nazi influence over the Falange.[52]

Viewed in this context, the fact that on three occasions—in April 1932, in the fall of 1933, and in March 1934— members of the Spanish conservative and traditionalist right traveled to Rome to seek aid for their insurrectionary plans against the republic—and succeeded in obtaining, thanks above all to Balbo's intervention, support and resources (though only a minimal portion was actually delivered to

them, since the bulk was to be provided only after the uprisings began)—cannot be overestimated.[53] First, because the contacts had not been initiated by Rome but by the Spaniards; second, because—as has already been noted—this type of contact had by then become a sort of norm for Fascism and was sometimes cultivated in opposition to the “traditionalists” at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, more often in the hope of seizing some “good opportunity,” without, however, this affecting the fundamental orientation of official diplomacy; third, because these agreements did not, in fact, include anything that conflicted with the basic line pursued by Palazzo Chigi and did not set forth any ideological or territorial objectives. A typical example is the secret agreement of 1934 with the monarchists of Renovación Española and the Carlists—the most important of the three—in the conclusion of which Mussolini himself personally participated. In exchange for Italian aid in the form of money and weapons and for the recognition—"to the extent internationally possible"—of the new Spanish government, Balbo and Mussolini had demanded that the latter, once in power, denounce and rescind the famous alleged Franco-Spanish secret agreement and conclude two treaties: one—which is of less interest to us here—a commercial treaty (“for the purpose of coordinating the export zones for certain products from both countries”), and one of friendship and neutrality, in which—as stated in the secret agreement—it would be specified that both powers agree to maintain the “status quo” in the western Mediterranean with regard to Spain’s territorial rights, both in terms of sovereignty and protectorate. Italy would guarantee Spain the aforementioned “status quo.”

De Rivera was received in Rome by Mussolini on October 19, 1933; for some of his reflections on the meeting, see J. A. Primo de Rivera, *Obras completas*, Madrid 1949, pp. 317 ff. The first economic aid to De Rivera was provided by the Ministry of Press and Propaganda in January 1935. By December of that year, however, it was halved (from 50,000 lire per month to 25,000) and was no longer paid.

Thus, one cannot help but agree with Coverdale’s assessment of it:[54]

The fact that the agreement was concluded after the 1933 elections—in which the center-right parties had dealt a crushing defeat to the Spanish left—demonstrates that Mussolini’s enduring hostility toward the republic was based not so much on ideological considerations as on traditional political and military ones. In fact, one can clearly discern, in the clauses of the agreement, the anti-French intent, which is precisely key to understanding it. Italian fears regarding a secret treaty—which would grant France special rights in the Balearic Islands and the right of transit for troops across the Iberian Peninsula—were unfounded but real. Mussolini felt only slightly more affinity for the monarchists than for the republicans, but the monarchists could be useful to him, whereas the republicans could not. He wished to help them in order to reduce French influence in Spain and the western Mediterranean, and they, for their part, were perfectly willing to accept Fascist aid to restore the monarchy. Mussolini’s political realism led him to support a group of conservative monarchists rather than one of the new fascist groups, for which he had greater ideological sympathy but which exerted almost no influence on the course of Spanish politics.

Most heads of government would have preferred not to meet personally with conspirators and would not have allowed an officer of such high rank as Marshal Balbo to sign an agreement with them. In these purely formal respects, the agreement is therefore characteristic of the Fascist regime; in substance, however, it belongs to the long—albeit not noble—series of cases of collusion by foreign powers with conspirators aiming to overthrow a legitimate government.

By the end of 1934, however, the Italians had abandoned these contacts. Two attempts by the Spanish

to revive them, in April 1935 and June 1936, came to nothing.[55] On July 16, 1936—the day before the military uprising against the republic began in Morocco—when the military attaché in Madrid transmitted the first report on the impending uprising,56 Rome was practically in the dark about what was unfolding. In fact, at the beginning of the second half of June, *Renovación Española* had informed the Ministry of Aeronautics of the imminence of an insurrectionary movement, and the Ministry of Aeronautics, in turn, had informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ciano and Mussolini, however, had not attached any importance to the news, since for years anti-republican groups had been announcing that they were on the verge of taking action and had never actually done so. The same fate befell, between July 12–13 and July 15, the reports personally delivered to Rome by one of the leaders of the Traditionalist Party, Rafael Olazabal, who had been part of the "delegation" that had signed the secret agreement of March 1934. He, too, was not taken seriously, and any offer of assistance was refused.[57] For several days, Palazzo Chigi was thus practically groping in the dark, unable to form a clear picture of the situation. The insurgents themselves, moreover, made no attempt to establish further contact, perhaps disappointed by the lack of interest shown by the Italian side in the reports transmitted to Rome in the preceding weeks and days. It was not until July 19—the very day in

There is no confirmation of certain reports received by the Foreign Office from Prague after the start of the uprising regarding alleged contacts and even agreements between the Spanish military and Italy even before the uprising. For these reports, see R. Quartararo, *Fascist Policy in the Balearic Islands (1936–1939)*, Rome, 1977, p. 24.

on which *Il Popolo d'Italia*, based on reports coming in from Morocco and Spain, wrote that the rebellion would likely be quelled within a few days—General Franco, faced with the serious difficulties encountered by the insurrectionary movement, decided to send the monarchist journalist Luis Bolin to Rome to request the dispatch of several aircraft. Upon arriving in Rome on the 21st (he had first gone to obtain authorization for the mission from General Sanjurjo), Bolin had two meetings on July 22 and 23, first with Ciano and then with Anfuso. The former appeared quite receptive, but the latter, instead of confirming this willingness, told him that the request could not be accepted.[58] Franco's request was, in fact, already known in Rome the day before Bolin met with Ciano. To buy time, the general had in fact also transmitted it via the Italian military attaché in Tangier. General Faldella (then a colonel serving with the SIM) reconstructed this initial series of contacts as follows[59]:

Here is how Franco's requests were formulated:

On July 20, he asked the military attaché in Tangier, Major Giuseppe Luccardi, whether the Italian government would be willing to provide aircraft for troop transport. Luccardi's telegram arrived at the SIM (military attachés corresponded only with the SIM, to which they reported) on the morning of July 21. Roatta sent for me to hear my opinion, and I told him: "Spain is like quicksand; if you put your hand in, you'll sink right in. If things go wrong, we'll be blamed; if they go well, we'll be forgotten. But we have to do something, without committing ourselves openly."

General Baistrocchi accepted the SIM's negative opinion, and Mussolini confirmed it later that day.

On July 21, General Franco invited Major Luccardi to a meeting at the border, and Luccardi reported this in a telegram that arrived in Rome on the 22nd. Franco painted a bleak picture of the situation: the Red Fleet was preventing him from transporting troops from Morocco to the mainland. He renewed his urgent request for eight transport aircraft with civilian crews, stating that granting this request was decisive for the outcome of the "movement." He told Luccardi that he was making a similar request to the Germans. The Air Force had no transport aircraft.

Major Luccardi had reported on the conversation—as was his duty—to the Minister Plenipotentiary in Tangier, De Rossi del Lion Nero, who, after a conversation with Franco on July 22 (to dissuade Franco from his plan to carry out a coup in the port of Tangier to seize Spanish warships anchored there), telegraphed General Franco's request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and found Ciano to be in favor.

59 The passage cited appears on pages 6 and 7 of a very lengthy "private review" written by Gen. E. Faldella (and preserved in his private archive) of the book by J. L. Alcofar Nassaes, C.T.V. Los legionarios italianos en la Guerra Civil Española 1936–1939, Barcelona 1972. In his "review," Faldella corrects some errors in the book and discusses it, supplementing it with a wealth of information and documents.

Meanwhile, on the 22nd, Luccardi sent a telegram urging a reply. On the 23rd, he telegraphed that General Franco had informed him that German influence in Spain was to be expected as a result of Italy's refusal. On the 24th, he telegraphed that Franco had informed De Rossi of the Black Lion that the Nationalists' situation was worsening, that the French were inciting the Moroccans against the Spaniards, and that a decision had been made in Paris to send 25 aircraft from Marseille to Barcelona.

In response to the telegram, Minister Ciano telegraphed him to ask Franco to specify his requests. On the 25th—or the 26th—Major Luccardi had another meeting with Franco, who requested—as an immediate necessity—12 transport aircraft, 12 reconnaissance aircraft, 1 fighter aircraft, 3,000 aircraft bombs, 40 anti-aircraft machine guns, and 4–5 transport ships. I jotted down the telegram: "We've made great progress since the 8 transport planes!"

On the 26th, Luccardi's telegram arrived at the SIM, along with a similar one from De Rossi of the Lion Nero to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the same time, Colonel Gabrielli, the military attaché in Madrid, telegraphed that French aircraft had arrived in Barcelona.

It was then decided to send the 12 S. 81 aircraft.

At the same time, two other Spanish initiatives were taking place in Rome. One was led by the former monarch Alfonso XIII, who was living in Italy and met personally with Mussolini, though Mussolini refused to make any specific commitments. Another, on July 26, took place at Ciano's office, initiated by Antonio Goicoechea, one of the leading figures of Renovación Española and a signatory to the secret agreement of March 1934, who had been sent to Rome by General Mola (who had simultaneously dispatched the Count of Valdeiglesias to Berlin). In a sense, this was the decisive move. At first, Ciano was reluctant to commit; however, once Goicoechea had explained the situation to him, spoken of the popular support on which the insurgents could rely, and reiterated that Mola, Franco, and the other generals were committed to fully respecting the secret agreement of '34, Ciano agreed to supply twelve S. 81 aircraft, provided they were paid for in full. The price was no small sum—over one million pounds—but Goicoechea had no difficulty in making his own commitment: in the days that followed, the Spanish financier Juan March arranged for the payment.[60] On July 30, the twelve aircraft departed for Morocco.

Although it was Ciano who told Goicoechea that he would sell him the aircraft, there is no doubt that the decision was made by him in agreement with Mussolini. The willingness he had already demonstrated—and which he later had to retract in his dealings with Bolin—shows, however, that Ciano was the more inclined of the two to help the insurgents, just as he was subsequently the more favorable toward a full-scale intervention. Mussolini was more uncertain. At first, he was even opposed

to it. Ciano himself confessed this to Cantalupo when, in January 1937, he announced his upcoming appointment as ambassador to the Franco regime:[61]

I must confess that at first he was opposed to the participation of our volunteers. When Franco, in Tangier last July, asked our consul general for twelve airplanes, Mussolini wrote “No” in blue pencil at the bottom of the telegram relaying the request. Three days later, the request was resubmitted in a more insistent form, and Mussolini wrote for the office: “File.” Only when the most urgent and desperate request arrived did he grant the twelve airplanes—solely so that they could provide aerial escort for three ships that were to transport three Moroccan battalions—that is, the first contingent of Franco’s troops—from Morocco to the Spanish coast. Then the matter escalated due to pressure from various quarters, and now we’re fully involved. When you leave, I’ll tell you everything. For now, I’ll just warn you that we can’t stay there long: Ethiopia is breathing down our necks; things went well for us there, but we must make sure they forget about it. The British would love nothing more than to make peace, and they’ve even set up the Non-Intervention Committee to start cooling down the Spanish conflict and its international repercussions. Soon Franco will launch a major offensive on Madrid by crossing the Jarama River and liberating the capital. Roatta will first lead a raid with the legionnaires straight toward Valencia along the coast, then move with his men to Guadalajara to descend on the capital. With the collapse of the central front, the North will also collapse. Bilbao and Santander—the front will be shortened by over a thousand kilometers, and everything will boil down to the siege of Barcelona. It’s a matter of a few weeks. Be ready to leave.

What is important, however, is that the decision was made after learning a) of Léon Blum’s decision to send planes and weapons to the Republican government to quell the rebellion;[62] b) that both Franco and Mola had also turned to Berlin. At the time, the second piece of news must have been of secondary importance, but its “additional” significance should not be underestimated, even though the decision was undoubtedly made from an essentially anti-French and Mediterranean political perspective.[63] In this regard as well, the person who saw things most clearly—even without knowing all the facts available today—was Coverdale, who rightly wrote:[64]

The news that the French Popular Front had decided to supply arms to the Republic made it plausible to believe that Spain would demonstrate its gratitude for the aid received in quelling the uprising by drawing closer

63 Significant in this regard is what was written by the former Republican ambassador to Paris, L. Araquistain, in “Las grandes potencias y la guerra de España (1936–1939),” in *Cuadernos*, March–April 1957, p. 69. In his view, Mussolini’s decision was determined not by ideological affinities with the rebels, but by “a matter of Mediterranean politics.”

toward France and by collaborating more actively with it to the detriment of Italy. On July 26, Ambassador Pedrazzi [in Madrid] drew the Foreign Ministry’s attention to an interview with the Spanish Socialist leader Largo Caballero published in *Paris Soir*. Largo predicted that, once the rebellion was suppressed, Spain would establish a socialist government, abandon its neutrality, and take its place alongside other democratic governments in the struggle against undemocratic ones. According to the ambassador, this demonstrated that a potential government victory over the Spanish National Revolution would take on further international significance. On the other hand, if the rebels succeeded, with Italian help, in overthrowing the French-backed republican regime, one could expect them, at the very least, to show consideration for Italian interests and adopt a clear anti-French stance.

The weight these considerations carried in Mussolini’s decision to authorize the first shipment of

aircraft is clearly evident from the fact that Ciano, in his talks with Goicoechea, insisted so strongly on adherence to the terms of the 1934 agreement, which obliged Spain to denounce the alleged secret Franco-Spanish pact. The Duce himself, in 1939, while justifying the decision to aid Franco before the Grand Council of Fascism, emphasized the importance of strategic and political motives, stating that Italy's participation in the civil war responded to a "fundamental historical necessity"—Italy's need to secure free access to the sea.

The rebels' request for aid to the Germans (which the Germans immediately accepted: the first German transport planes, which Franco used to transfer his troops to Andalusia, arrived on July 29) and, more generally, Hitler's stance toward the new situation that had arisen in Spain—while not decisive with regard to Mussolini and Ciano's initial decision—were nonetheless of great importance with respect to the decisions adopted in the weeks that immediately followed. Based on the available documentation, there is no reason to believe that Ciano and, above all, Mussolini—even though they ultimately decided to send the twelve S. 81s—had a clear idea of what they would do next and, in particular, that they had decided to go beyond sending a limited number of aircraft and weapons.[65] The most likely scenario is that they were confident that modest material aid would enable the rebel generals to bring the uprising to a victorious conclusion in a short time. Contrary to what the French immediately believed, "it is also highly unlikely that by the end of July they were thinking of somehow seizing the Balearic Islands. This is suggested by the fact that when the insurgents in Majorca, finding themselves in difficulty, also considered turning to Rome for help, the reception they received was

65 By August 28, Italy had sent the rebels 12 bomber aircraft and 27 fighter aircraft, 5 fast tanks, 12 anti-aircraft guns, and 40 machine guns. By the same date, the Germans had sent 26 bomber aircraft and 15 fighter aircraft, 20 anti-aircraft guns, 50 machine guns, and 8,000 rifles.

66 See DDF, vol. II, III, pp. 130 ff., which indicates that the French were also considering the possibility of a German surprise attack on the Canary Islands.

far from enthusiastic, the negotiations were not exactly swift, and, as usual, they were told that if they wanted aircraft, they would have to buy them. And if, at the end of August, Arconovaldo Bonaccorsi (the famous "Count Rossi") was sent to Mallorca, it was only after yet another urgent request from the local Falangist leader for a military advisor. Only at this point did the first real aid begin to pour in from Italy, and an Italian base was established on the island.[67]

To "clarify" matters for Mussolini and Ciano and persuade them to take a further step toward intervention in Spain—especially after the international situation had begun to take shape and fears of massive French aid to the Republican government had been partially allayed, partly due to the resistance Blum had encountered not only within the country but even within his own government, and partly due to the discreet but firm efforts by England to put the brakes on the situation; it was above all the Nazis who immediately saw the events in Spain as an opportunity to make the Italian-German rapprochement more effective and, at the same time, to place a new and very significant obstacle in the way of the rapprochement between Italy and the Anglo-French powers.

On July 31, the French government—by then aware of Italy's first shipment of aircraft (two of the S. 81s, having run out of fuel, had crashed in French Morocco and a third at sea)—had been forced to abandon the idea of directly aiding the Spanish Republicans and was led to propose to England and Italy, as Mediterranean powers, the opportunity to adopt "common rules of non-intervention." Subsequently, the invitation would be extended to Germany and Portugal and, gradually, to the USSR and various other countries. Based on a detailed memo prepared for him by Mussolini, Ciano had tried

to buy time.[68] However, it would not have been possible to refuse the French initiative, since that would have amounted to condemning Italy to complete international isolation, given that even Germany was willing to accept it. On the other hand, agreeing to it, on the one hand, did not preclude the possibility—if deemed appropriate—of continuing to aid the Nationalists through indirect channels, and, on the other hand, could offer good opportunities for political maneuvering. Thus, if one wishes to summarize the Italian position in the first weeks of August, it must be said that the person who best grasped it was the German chargé d'affaires in Rome, who on August 14 summarized it as follows in Berlin[69]: all Italian sympathies lay with the nationalists, who were being aided with supplies of arms and ammunition; a victory for the Spanish government was regarded in Rome as a victory for France over Italy and for Bolshevism, which, once it had taken hold in Spain, would spread beyond its borders as well.

68 See the accounts of his discussions, between August 3 and 17, with the French ambassador in *L'Europa verso la catastrofe* (op. cit.), pp. 50 ff. In these accounts, the influence of the "notes for an oral response to the French proposal for 'non-intervention' in the Spanish Civil War"—drafted by Mussolini for Ciano on August 4 or 5—is evident:

"1) Italy, in principle, supports the position of non-intervention in the civil war ravaging Spain.

2) Italy asks whether moral solidarity with one of the warring parties—solidarity that is expressed through public demonstrations, press campaigns, fundraising drives, the recruitment of volunteers, etc. —does not already constitute a blatant and dangerous form of intervention.

3) Italy wishes to know whether the commitment to non-intervention will be universal or not, and whether it will apply only to governments or also to private individuals.

4) Italy wishes to know whether the proposing government also has in mind mechanisms for monitoring compliance—or lack thereof—with the commitment to non-intervention."

Therefore, the German diplomat wrote, while Italy ardently hopes for the rebels' victory, it is striving, on the other hand, not to exacerbate the international situation. This explains its stance on the issue of the non-intervention agreement proposed by France. There is a conviction that, once the agreement is signed, Italian arms deliveries will no longer be possible—unlike French deliveries, which are difficult to monitor—and Italy therefore feels at a disadvantage compared to France, which it distrusts. However, it does not wish to be seen as the party obstructing the agreement. This is why it is likely that Italy will nevertheless sign a non-intervention agreement. Nevertheless, Italy is seeking to delay the conclusion of the agreement in order to continue supplying arms to General Franco for as long as possible. Hence the side issues and counterproposals with which you are familiar, which are naturally intended—in the event that an agreement is concluded—to prevent, first and foremost, France and Russia from continuing their support for the government faction as much as possible.

And in fact, on August 21, Italy had agreed to the French proposal, despite the intense irritation aroused at Palazzo Venezia and Palazzo Chigi by the positions taken by certain French political and labor leaders—including the Minister of the Interior—who openly supported the Spanish Republicans. 70

During these weeks, the German attitude toward Italy had been extremely discreet. Both the Wilhelmstrasse and Ribbentrop—who was engaged in his extraordinary mission in London—were, albeit for partially different reasons, too interested in the French proposal to do anything that might

dissuade Rome from accepting it. As soon as Rome did so, however, Hitler acted immediately. The Prince of Hesse, husband of one of Victor Emmanuel III's daughters, Mafalda, and a high-ranking Nazi official, was sent to Rome with the "special mission" of proposing to Mussolini "the closest possible collaboration in Spanish affairs" and, to begin with, of sending two liaison officers—one Italian and one German—to General Franco, as well as of reassuring Rome about German intentions. "We," he was to let them know, "have no political aspirations, much less territorial ones, in the Mediterranean, but are solely concerned that Bolshevism not take root in Spain and spread from Spain to other countries." All we know about the Prince of Hesse's lightning visit to Rome is what von Neurath reported on August 27—immediately after the prince's return to Berlin—to the director of the political department at Wilhelmstrasse: The "Duce" had stated that he could not predict the outcome of the struggle in Spain and, precisely for this reason, had accepted the German proposal, considering it useful for better assessing General Franco's chances of victory, and had in turn assured that he, too, had no "political aspirations, much less territorial ones, in the Mediterranean"71.

Despite the relatively noncommittal tone of Mussolini's response, the Prince of Hesse's mission constituted an important and, in some respects, decisive moment in Fascist Spanish policy. Following this, in fact, on August 26, Ciano informed the head of the SIM, Roatta, that "agreements had been reached with the Reich to send an Italian and a German mission to General Franco," which would be tasked with "examining possibilities and proposals for support of the Nationalists by the armed forces (supplies of military equipment and personnel)" from Italy and Germany, "to advise the Spanish High Command on the possible development of military operations," "to safeguard the respective nations' interests in the political, military, and economic spheres," and to collaborate with one another toward these ends. Two days later, General Roatta made contact with Admiral Canaris, head of the German intelligence service, to discuss the details of the operation; thereafter, on September 1, the two missions (Colonel Faldella was placed in charge of the Italian one) departed for Spain accompanied by Roatta himself, since—until January 1, 1937, when Ciano centralized all management of the operation within the Spain Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—the operation had been entrusted to the SIM72.

No sooner had the Italian-German "collaboration" begun than it immediately proved to be a trap designed to draw Italian politics deeper and deeper into the Spanish quicksand—beyond Rome's initial intentions—and to make Italian-British relations increasingly difficult. So much so that Grandi wrote in his memoirs73:

Italian-British relations, already endangered by the Abyssinian question, were in fact compromised and poisoned by the Spanish question. This, not that, is the true cause of the definitive rift. The Abyssinian question had been an acute but brief illness. Like all brief illnesses, it would have led to a rapid recovery and ultimately helped to strengthen Italian-British relations. The Spanish question, however, had the characteristics of an insidious, slow, and progressive illness. It eventually became chronic. It was the great tool, in Germany's hands, for creating an ever-widening chasm between Italy and Great Britain. It paved the way for the Anti-Comintern Pact, establishing the first military cooperation between Hitler and Mussolini. Just as it had been, a century earlier, at the root of the decline of the Napoleonic dictatorship, it was destined to be equally at the root of the decline of the Nazi and Fascist dictatorships. Just as Spain and Russia had been the determining factor a century earlier, Spain and Russia were destined, in a different historical context, to become so once again.

The documentation available today suggests that while the Berlin leadership was quite cautious and divided regarding the prospects and limits of German involvement in Spain,[74] almost everyone—and in particular the army leaders and diplomats—was nonetheless determined to make their collaboration with the Italians largely instrumental and as non-committal as possible. What mattered most to them

was both to maximize support for Franco to secure lasting economic footholds in the country and to use Spain as a military testing ground, and to commit themselves militarily—and, to the extent feasible, politically—as little as possible in a direct manner, so as to preserve Germany's international "image" as much as possible and not jeopardize their attempts to reach an agreement with London; but, at the same time, doing everything possible to involve Italy as fully as possible and thus undermine the prospects for an Italian-British rapprochement as much as possible.[75] Hence their tendency to urge Italian commitment, while implying that they were willing to do the same on an equal footing—and sometimes even committing to do so—only to almost always back out or, at the very least, scale back their actual participation. Among the various documents that could be cited in this regard, one of the most telling is a lengthy report dated November 18, 1936, by Ambassador von Hassel in Rome, in which the "Italian" strategy of German policy in Spain is outlined with extreme clarity. It reads76:

75 According to Ambassador De Chambrun (who claimed to have received the information from "an important figure in Mussolini's immediate entourage"), even the decision to send the first aid to the Spanish insurgents was influenced by pressure from the Germans, who allegedly used the "alleged aid we provided to the Madrid government" and the "communist threat" as leverage for this purpose. See DDF, vol. II, III, p. 197.

Given the general political line I have outlined, Germany, in my view, has every reason to hope that Italy will take an increasingly active interest in the Spanish question. The Spanish conflict may play a role in Italy's relations with France and England similar to that of the Abyssinian conflict, in the sense that it clearly highlights the opposition between the real interests of the great powers and thus removes the risk for Italy of becoming entangled in Western intrigues. The struggle for political prestige in Spain lays bare the natural opposition that exists between Italy and France, at the very same time that Italian power in the western Mediterranean is coming into competition with that of England. Italy will find it all the more advantageous to rely heavily on Germany to counter the Western powers, precisely with a view to the general agreement that we hope to see realized between Western and Central Europe on the basis of complete equality of rights. This situation requires us, in my opinion, to adopt the following guideline: to leave to Italy the initiative in its policy toward Spain, but at the same time to actively support this policy with our goodwill in a sufficiently close manner to prevent events from taking a turn that would harm Germany's immediate or long-term interests, whether Nationalist Spain suffers a defeat or even if England and Italy were to conclude a direct agreement between themselves should the situation continue to stabilize. We have little reason to be jealous that Fascism is first and foremost taking on the thorny mission of implementing a political and social program under a banner that has until now been purely military and anti-communist. Anyone familiar with the Spanish people and the Spanish climate must be skeptical—and even concerned about the future of German-Spanish relations (and perhaps also German-Italian cooperation)—in the face of an attempt to transplant National Socialism into Spain using German methods and with German assistance. Latin Fascism, with its more formal political structure, has a better chance of succeeding; a certain Spanish antipathy toward Italians, and, in general, a rebellious attitude toward foreigners who presume to command, may pose obstacles. It is up to the Italians to figure out how to deal with this. As for us, we would have every reason to rejoice if a force were to emerge in southern France—one that is immune to Bolshevism but allied with Italy—that would give the French and the British pause for thought: a force that would oppose the passage of French troops from Africa through the territory and that, in the economic sphere, would fully meet our needs.

On the Italian side, it was soon realized that there was something ambiguous about the German stance. The first to sense this were probably Roatta and Faldella. Ciano, too, soon had this feeling, but—almost certainly—rather than seeing it as a maneuver to cut the ground from under his feet with London, he

must have thought that the Germans were tending to “meddle” too much in Spanish domestic politics and, through that, in the Mediterranean.[77] In any case, he did nothing to counter the German maneuver. This was likely also because he, too, was influenced by the covert yet vast efforts of Italian political and economic circles (especially in agriculture, which had a particular interest in the German market) that the Germans were initiating precisely during this period and which were beginning to bear their first fruits. These efforts[78] are very difficult to reconstruct in detail today, but which must not be underestimated if one wishes to understand the reality of Italian politics from mid-1936 onward and the reasons for certain widespread sympathies toward the Germans that emerged above all in 1937–38 in circles that until then had been immune to them and had at times even opposed their very earliest manifestations by certain hardline Fascist figures or groups.

The anti-fascist movement’s swift response to the military revolt and the support given to it by the Fascist government certainly played a very significant role in pushing Rome to become increasingly involved in Spain (the first to take a stand, as early as July 31, was *Giustizia e Libertà* with the slogan “The civil war of the Spanish proletariat is the war of all anti-fascists; the place for revolutionaries is in Spain”79), which soon materialized with the dispatch of volunteers to the Republican army, and the arrival first (in late August) of the first advisers and then (in October) of the first military supplies from the USSR81. Along with the formation of the government headed by Largo Caballero—which, for the first time in Western Europe, included not only Republicans and Socialists but also Communists— this series of events, in addition to dealing a severe blow to the Nationalists’ hopes for a swift victory, was viewed in Rome as an antifascist “challenge” to Italy and, at the same time, a serious threat of “red” contagion that could spread from Spain to other countries as well

78 Recalling these maneuvers, D. Grandi wrote in his Memoirs: “Pressure was also exerted by exploiting the economic difficulties of Italy, which had emerged victorious but was financially exhausted.” Germany had always been the largest market for Italy’s agricultural products. The interests of Italian farmers were used as a tool in the Italian-German alliance. Delegations of experts and politicians began exchanging visits between Rome and Berlin. Men close to Mussolini were targeted by a persistent campaign of co-optation, using every means available. Women were not overlooked. While throngs of beautiful German women were sent to Rome to “work” among men of the Fascist movement and the Party, Edda Ciano, the Duce’s daughter, was invited and welcomed in Berlin like a queen, and no effort was spared to highlight the warm reception she received from the Germans by contrasting it with the cold and reserved one the British had given her in previous years in London. This woman returned from Germany elated and became one of the most active propagandists for the Italian-German alliance. Ciano, her husband, was—and made no secret of it—jealous of the political standing his wife had gained in the eyes of the Germans. Everything was done to demonstrate the purported identity between Fascism and Nazism. The Germans loudly proclaimed that they were emulating Fascism, and Fascism, without realizing it, copied German methods and organization. Men who showed reluctance to adhere to this ideology were singled out and denounced as dangerous, disloyal, and corrupted by insidious Anglo-Saxon propaganda. They had to be removed, gotten rid of.”

For E. Ciano’s trip to Germany and his initial pro-German stance, see La mia testimonianza, op. cit., pp. 122 ff.

80 On Italian volunteers in the Republican ranks, see A. Garosci, *La vita di Carlo Rosselli*, Rome-Florence-Milan 1945; R. Pacciardi, *Il battaglione Garibaldi*, Rome 1945; L. Longo, *Le Brigate internazionali in Spagna*, Rome 1956.

and even reverberate to some extent in Italy, reawakening unrest that had never been entirely quelled.[82]

To this must be added that Franco, deeply concerned by the first arrivals of Soviet aircraft, tanks, and materiel, on October 16, in two successive meetings he had requested—one in the afternoon and one in the evening—asked Colonel Faldella for further massive aid. As evidenced by the two reports immediately sent by the SIM to Rome, Franco did not request the dispatch of troops, but rather of aircraft, tanks, and anti-tank weapons, as well as (halfway between Italy and Germany) two submarines and two destroyers to "deprive the Reds of free access to the ports" and to "gain control of the sea." In addition—and this was the subject of the second meeting—Franco "expressed his strong desire that the Italian air force from Mallorca and, if possible, that from Sardinia carry out bombing raids on the port of Cartagena against the merchant steamships located there." All of this was proposed on the grounds that he was "now facing not only Red Spain, but Russia as well" and that he felt "he was waging a crusade against Bolshevism, a crusade in which Spain's interests are intertwined with those of Italy and Germany," so it was appropriate "to address the matter in its entirety and provide him, Franco, with the means to fight the now-declared Russian enemy."[83] It is clear that in the face of such pressing appeals it was difficult to refuse, all the more so since even the SIM's military mission in Spain, despite its caution, appeared to share them. Typical in this regard is the assessment it expressed at the conclusion of its analysis of the Spanish situation, set forth in a comprehensive report drafted on November 16–17, 1936[84]:

All things considered, there are serious deficiencies within the White forces (especially the army and navy).

But these same deficiencies exist, to a greater extent, in the opposing forces.

Therefore, I believe that if the support and supplies provided by foreign countries to the Reds are offset by equivalent support and supplies to the Nationalists, the latter will prevail.

However, Ciano's presence at Palazzo Chigi and the particular psychological state that—as we have seen—Mussolini was going through also played a significant role. As Felice Guarneri wrote—who, first as undersecretary and later as minister of Trade and Currency, maintained constant contact with him regarding the Spanish affair[85],

82 For the reactions sparked by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in various social circles—particularly among workers and the general populace, as well as among the "dormant" anti-fascist movement—and for the close attention with which these reactions were monitored by the police, see, in addition to the essay by A. Aquarone already cited several times, *La guerra di Spagna e l'opinione pubblica italiana*, op. cit., pp. 27 ff., the prefectural documents and those of the OVRA (ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Division of General Affairs and Research [1920–1945], 1936, b. 22) reproduced in the Appendix, Document 7.

Ciano regarded Spain—and later, along with it, Albania—as spheres under his exclusive control, and viewed our intervention in those countries as two masterpieces of his policy and the finest adornment of his count's crown....But he had recklessly dragged Italy into this adventure, with a gesture of swashbuckling bravado and, at the same time, youthful recklessness, without weighing the consequences; he had persisted in it, with Mussolini's almost passive consent, to claim it as his own glory when the military leaders in charge had taken it for granted that, after the conquest of Málaga, Franco's forces would liberate Madrid within fifteen days.

As can be seen, this is a very harsh judgment, but essentially fair. In the Spanish affair, Ciano certainly

saw an opportunity not only to give Italian foreign policy a new, more dynamic tone, but also to immediately earn the trust Mussolini had placed in him and to shake off the label of the “Duce’s son-in-law,” earning his rights as “heir apparent” “on the battlefield.” All of this was seasoned, as Guarneri rightly noted, with an incredible lack of caution and an equally incredible recklessness that led him to want to centralize the management of the entire Spanish affair under his personal control, to the point of almost setting himself up as a strategist. A typical example is the account given by Cantalupo, recounting his meeting with Ciano in the second ten-day period of January) 86

37:

Perhaps to return to the topic of Madrid’s more or less imminent fall, he stood up and approached a large 16th-century-style wooden lectern in the center of the room, on which was spread out a military map of Spain, marked in the middle by an irregular strip of red Spanish and Italian flags facing each other. Ciano wanted to show me how things stood and how they would soon be: Roatta on Málaga and Valencia, Orgaz on the Jarama and Madrid, Roatta again on the Sierra and from there on to Guadalajara, the collapse and breakdown of the Madrid defense system with the liberation of the capital, the surrender of the Basque Country at the government’s discretion, a push from San Sebastián to Barcelona, France’s “abandonment” of the Republican government, general peace, and the end of the conflict. He foresaw neither setbacks nor delays.

Meanwhile, he was moving little flags around, shifting regiments, and adjusting battle lines. It seemed as if he were playing chess. I no longer recognized him; he was no longer a serious person: he was a high schooler posing as a strategist, an amateur general. By sticking pins into the map, he created encouraging hypotheses and strategic certainties. He was putting on a show.

Given this psychological attitude of his and his desire for self-affirmation—and with Mussolini increasingly tending to shut himself away in ideological problems and having, albeit after much hesitation, the decision to aid the rebels—trusting him while at the same time wanting to test and promote him, gave him a freedom of action that a Grandi or a Suvich had never had—it is clear that Ciano’s chances of realizing the German game and the risks it entailed for Italy were very slim. Indeed, the Germans found in him an unwitting ally who, day after day, drew Italy ever deeper into the Spanish quicksand. This was all the more so because many forces—albeit for different reasons—were pressing for more substantial aid and even for intervention alongside the Nationalists.

Catholic organizations, newspapers, and the clergy—from the highest ranks down to the lowest levels —were almost unanimously in favor of Franco and of open support for the Nationalists. Concerned by the prospect of the triumph of “atheistic Bolshevism” in Spain and deeply troubled by the massacres, violence, and anti-Catholic tendencies that had begun to characterize life in the regions controlled by the Republicans, they—as Aquarone87 has pointed out—had taken a stand from the very first days of the rebellion, when the regime’s press and even newspapers such as “Il regime fascista” still maintained a fairly cautious stance and showed uncertainty and perplexity in assessing the events in Spain. For the *Osservatore Romano*, which had launched the campaign as early as July 23, “raising questions of politics, reaction, or freedom; of authoritarianism or democracy in regimes, governments, or parties” was merely creating confusion. For the Vatican organ (July 27–28), one needed only “to speak of pure, simple, unequivocal humanity. The crossroads must determine whether one stands with humanity or proceeds outside of it.” From this perspective, for the *Osservatore Romano*—and, following its lead, for the overwhelming majority of the Catholic press (including that of youth and intellectual groups less tied to conservative positions and engaged in the search for new, autonomous themes specific to Catholics[88])—it was absurd to equate—as certain Catholics in other countries did —the intervention of

groups of foreign citizens in support of the freedom and independence of a country, as had occurred in other times and circumstances, and the intervention “in the service of the Third International” that was taking place in Spain (August 17–18). In this country, as Father Rosa wrote in *Civiltà Cattolica*[8], “horrific tragedies, savage crimes, a hellish tragedy of bloodshed, fires, massacres, and collective madness demonstrate that a satanic storm has now been unleashed upon the peoples, heralding death as well as the profound decline of nations.” Faced with this reality, speaking of non-intervention became a crime against humanity. What was needed was firm “resistance to the new barbarism,” which, above all, would give new “impetus to a more intense Christian life.”[90]

Some moderate Fascist groups were also moving along similar lines; concerned about certain radical tendencies circulating within the regime and its growing rapprochement with Germany, saw Italian aid to the nationalists—in the name of anti-Bolshevism, anti-Freemasonry, and the defense of Christian civilization—as a way to strengthen the bonds between Fascism and the Church and to give the regime a moderate, “Latin Catholic” perspective for domestic and international development.

While by no means underestimating this type of stance—which, not coincidentally, once the decision was made to continue providing aid to the Nationalists and, later, to embark on full-scale intervention, the Fascist press began to act as a sounding board and to use them to support the validity and legitimacy of its own arguments, it must also be said that the pressure exerted by the PNF and the Militia carried greater weight (not least because of their ability to influence Ciano and Mussolini directly).

The party, on the one hand, realized that among a segment of the fascist movement—and especially among intellectuals and young people—the traditionalist, right-wing conservative, and reactionary character that clearly distinguished the movement of the rebel officers was causing uncertainty and perplexity, to the extent that there was no shortage of more or less openly critical positions toward it,[91] and, on the other hand, wanted to seize the opportunity to exert its own role as a driving force and political initiative on the government and to finally regain the upper hand over the “supporters” and moderate fascists—what was at heart was to give the policy toward Spain* an openly fascist character in line with the new “conscience of the Empire” that was to become common to all Italians. On the domestic front, this meant confronting the events in Spain, evaluating them, and experiencing them from a perspective of ideological engagement that, by transcending all “particularism,” all “provincialism,” and all traditional and diplomatic views of the complexity and interdependence of international affairs, and project them precisely into the broader and more decisive context of a conscious “awareness” of the “imperial” duties and tasks of Italy and the Italians. And this applied not only to themselves but also to the world and, first and foremost, to the Spanish people themselves, since, on the foreign policy front, the party’s logic included the fascistization of the Spanish movement and the creation in Spain of a regime modeled on the Italian one. The most lucid and, chronologically speaking, one of the very first to point out this dual perspective was Bottai in *Critica fascista*, writing as early as September 1, 1992:

Those universal values, which Fascism embodies and which have thus far been constantly sacrificed and suppressed by the exigencies of a purely national policy, must now, on the imperial level, expand, broaden their influence, take precedence over other more contingent and particular values, and advance decisively on the international front. Non-intervention and non-interference are one thing—principles applicable to specific situations in space and time—but the right and duty of a people, who see themselves as the bearers of a new conception of civil life, to express it and to spread awareness of it, are another matter entirely. And this does not contradict that.

One may choose not to supply weapons; but one cannot fail to supply ideas to the peoples who are fighting.

The standard-bearers of this PNF initiative, however, were Starace and Farinacci, who as early as August 6 had written to Mussolini, “ardently hoping that the events in Spain would place us, as soon as possible, in a position to intervene” and placing himself at Mussolini’s full disposal for anything that might be useful to undertake “without unduly compromising the government, since I am also the editor of a newspaper.”93 And it was precisely with this in mind that, in March 1937, Farinacci’s much-discussed mission to Spain would come about—the only fascist attempt of any significance to interfere politically and ideologically in the internal affairs of the Nationalists, seeking to favor one group, the Falangists (who, as Farinacci wrote to Mussolini from Salamanca on March 5, were “the only movement that looks to Rome and is enthusiastic about fascism”), and to make them the focal point of a future single party of a distinctly fascist nature. The mission, however, 94 produced no concrete results and sparked a whole series

94 Information regarding the Farinacci mission is scarce and imprecise; R. Cantalupo (in *Fu la Spagna*, op. cit., pp. 146 ff.) has written about it at some length, but his account gives the impression of being marred by a prejudicial (and, in truth, mutual) hostility toward Farinacci. The only somewhat precise details can be gleaned from the letters sent by Farinacci to Mussolini from Spain and immediately after his return to Italy. See ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence (1922–1943), 242/R, file “R. Farinacci,” sub. 39. It is very likely that the mission must have originated (or at least received the green light) after Mussolini read a “memo” for Ciano, dated November 18, 1936, and drafted by an official from Palazzo Chigi (F. Anfuso?) who had previously traveled to Spain. In the first part of this note (which is preserved in ACS, Private Secretariat of suspicions and discontent, heightened by the fact that *The Times* reported that Farinacci had been tasked with persuading Franco to accept the Duke of Aosta as sovereign.95 Farinacci had contacts with the Falangists led by Manuel Hedilla—the founder of the Falange’s trade union organization and provisional leader of the movement after Primo de Rivera and other key figures had disappeared from the scene during the early phase of the uprising—and with the requetés “to lay the foundations for a new national movement, which Franco should promote and utilize.” Franco (who viewed the Falangists—and Hedilla’s group in particular—with great suspicion, so much so that a few weeks later he would have Hedilla arrested and sentenced to death, although the sentence was later commuted to imprisonment) told him, however, that he did not intend to “rely on these parties, because they lack leaders of any real worth” and made it clear that he did not wish to have his hands tied in any way. As Farinacci wrote to Mussolini in the aforementioned letter of March 5, he had “no expectations of the Duce.” In “Gran Consiglio,” vol. 14 [1936], insert C, we find this analysis of the internal nationalist political situation, which may well have served as the basis for Farinacci’s mission:

“General Franco.

It is difficult to judge Franco as the leader of a popular national movement—that is, as the representative of a force that seizes the state by virtue of its revolutionary impetus. Only now is Franco beginning to realize that he is the leader of a vast social movement and that Spain expects renewal from him. Until now, he has been a general, and as such bound to a group of generals; to connect with the nation, he has been compelled to break free from purely military ties. Being the youngest, most intelligent, and most steadfast of the generals who rose up against the Marxists, he has instinctively gravitated toward a political ideology resembling Fascism. I say “resembles” because the “Falange,” for which Franco has no shortage of sympathy, is a vast party that was put to the test too soon to have had time to develop a program. Franco is a malleable figure. He is the only one of the Spanish generals

to whom one can frankly say that he is ignorant of certain things. It is better not to say this to the others. If we want modern Spain not to solidify, after this extremely bloody struggle, into a feudal and clerical-leaning form of government that would end up adding more blood to the much that has already been shed, we will need to properly educate the Generalissimo and persuade him to reform and strengthen the "Falange." Franco is, therefore, the only Fascist in Spain. Nazism has no hold on him because Franco is Galician, rational, loves to understand things, and wants to see for himself. A certain faction within the "Falange" hopes to block his path by placing the young De Rivera between him and the Spanish people, if it proves possible to secure his release. That is, to put the "politician" in place of the military man. The greatest internal obstacle for Franco, however, is posed by the

Requetés

"The Requetés are members of the Spanish Legitimist Party, whose leader recently died in Vienna. Well-organized and fairly numerous, they have proven themselves in battle. They bring together all the remnants of classical, noble, feudal Spain. Now that they lack a leader, they would likely end up aligning themselves with the branch of the Bourbons that last reigned. Their active participation in the anti-Marxist struggle, along with the fact that some of the most prominent generals (Mola, Orgaz) are Requetés, could create serious difficulties for Franco when he seeks to organize the state. Franco is wary of them, but the Falange is still too disorganized to attract the Requetés, who take pride in their military formations. Add to this that the "Falange" is the group that has most thoroughly "limpiado"—that is, "cleansed"—the occupied cities by executing those deemed worthy of execution. A conflict will be inevitable between the Falange and the Requetés if Franco does not articulate a social doctrine capable of assimilating this turbulent world, which has its roots in what is most intimately Spanish."

95 R. Cantalupo, *Fu la Spagna* (op. cit.), pp. 146 ff., maintains that the report was true and that Farinacci was acting in concert with Mussolini. His account is confirmed by M. G. Venero, *Falange en la guerra de España: La Unificación y Hedilla* (Bordeaux, 1967), p. 312, which cites a statement by Hedilla made many years later but which likely draws on Cantalupo's account. General Faldella, in his previously mentioned "private review" of J. L. Alcofar Nassaes's book, denies that it has any basis in fact.

"He still had no clear idea of what tomorrow's Spain would be like" and was concerned "only with winning the war and then maintaining, for a long period, an authoritarian (or rather dictatorial) government to purge the nation of all those who had had direct or indirect contacts with, or sympathies for, the Reds." The only point on which Franco was somewhat specific was regarding the corporatist system, which he said he wanted to implement "just as it has been done in Italy, Germany, Austria, and Portugal." Even on the issue of the monarchy, he remained entirely vague. "First," he told her, "I must create the nation; then we will consider whether it is appropriate to appoint a king." A fiasco, as can be seen, across the board, but one that does not diminish the significance of the mission, which remains characteristic of the PNF's attitude and its attempts to force the evolution of nationalism in a fascist direction and to counter the policy of non-interference in the nationalists' internal political affairs pursued instead by Palazzo Chigi and the SIM. All the more so because, even though it ended in failure, Farinacci's mission did take place, and this demonstrates that the PNF's pressure managed to make inroads even where it sought to achieve objectives that Ciano and Mussolini did not necessarily share or viewed (especially Mussolini) from a different perspective: not that of a "fascistization" of nationalism (which was difficult to achieve and counterproductive at that time, both among the Spanish and on the diplomatic front), but rather that of being able to count on a friendly party that could influence Franco to adopt a more dynamic approach to the war. And this suggests just how strong and persuasive such pressures must have been in areas where there was no clear divergence of views, as in

the case of the domestic presentation and exploitation of the civil war and Italy's intervention.

All things considered, however, it was the Militia—rather than the PNF—that achieved the greatest results in this regard and, more importantly, those with the most far-reaching consequences for Italian policy in Spain. Very little is known about the role of the MVSN in the genesis of Italian intervention in Spain. A careful reading of the available documentation from the Spain Office reveals, however, that its role must have been extremely important and far more in line with Ciano's views than that of the PNF. From a general political standpoint, its position must have been similar to that of the party, and it cannot be ruled out that, in this regard, Starace and Russo—the Chief of Staff of the MVSN—acted in some measure in concert. On a more specific level, however, the Militia must have seen the Spanish Civil War as an unexpected opportunity to gain the upper hand over the army, which—especially after De Bono was replaced by Badoglio—had reaped the vast majority of the laurels in Ethiopia and reaffirmed its supremacy over the Militia in every respect. If the war in Ethiopia had been, all things considered, a "national" war—the MVSN leaders must have thought—the Spanish Civil War should have been a "Fascist" war and, therefore, one for the Militia, all the more so because, with rare exceptions, the Army—and even more so the Navy—appeared to view the events in Spain with extreme caution and made no secret of their desire to curb any tendency to become more deeply involved than had already been the case. A success for the Militia in Spain would have greatly bolstered its meager prestige and allowed it to place its relations with the army on a new footing—one that was certainly far more advantageous for it. Hence not only its push, like that of the PNF, for greater Italian initiative in Spain and for direct intervention, but also its effort to rush the operation and be the protagonist of the intervention. Some notes preserved in Ciano's diary regarding Badoglio's polemical outbursts against the Spanish campaign—in which Ciano's name was linked to that of Russo—and the tone with which Ciano, after the conquest of Santander, recalled the attacks leveled against him and Russo after Guadala)'and his defense of the Militia during those "dark hours"96 are extremely significant and confirm the impression gained from reading the scarce specific documentation available. Above all, they confirm the influence and support that the Militia's pressure must have found with Ciano.

In the first weeks of the Civil War, Italian aid to the Nationalists consisted essentially of supplies and technical personnel. Some of these technicians (artillerymen, tank crews, and airmen) had participated in the fighting. Until the end of December, however, there were no actual combat units in Spain, nor had Franco—who on October 1 had been appointed supreme commander and head of state of the insurgents and had taken up residence in Burgos—ever requested the dispatch of troops, despite having insistently urged new and more massive shipments of weapons and supplies and, as we have seen, the intervention of the Italian Air Force to block Republican ports, had ever requested the dispatch of troops. The transition from this initial phase of aid to that of full-scale intervention began in the last ten days of October, when Rome—concerned about the stalemate that was taking shape in Spain and convinced that Soviet aid to the Republicans, on the one hand, could shift the balance of power in their favor, but, on the other hand, could play in their favor on the international stage

96 G. Ciano, Diary, op. cit., pp. 28 ff.; as well as the assessment on p. 29: "This Spanish venture faces constant opposition from the Navy, which is offering passive resistance. The Air Force is doing very well. The Army is proceeding as usual. The Militia is acting with enthusiasm."

for Italy and somehow justify greater Italian intervention in Spain; he believed that a greater Italian-German commitment in support of Franco would be decisive and would quickly bring about the collapse of the Republicans. Bolstered by this conviction, Ciano, during his trip to Germany, informed von Neurath and Hitler that Mussolini intended to "make a decisive military effort to bring about the

collapse of the Madrid government" and asked them if they were ready "to join in this action." It is important to note that in the talks with von Neurath—during which an "immediate and joint military effort" was agreed upon, along with the recognition of Franco's government after the conquest of Madrid and the planning of a joint response in the event that a "red" autonomous state were established in Catalonia—the discussion focused solely on sending equipment, particularly aircraft and submarines. Only Hitler97 spoke of a possible deployment of "troop units." Although there was no shortage of supporters in Rome for direct intervention, in the third decade of October, Mussolini—and probably Ciano as well—did not yet seem to be considering such a demanding and risky step. What led them to change their minds the following month was the unexpected, resolute resistance of the Republicans on the outskirts of Madrid.

Faced with the prospect of a further prolongation of the civil war, Rome decided to move quickly. On November 18, simultaneously with Germany, it recognized Franco's government and immediately began negotiations with it to conclude a secret agreement governing their mutual relations. Ten days later, the agreement was concluded.

As Coverdale99 rightly noted, the agreement100 once again demonstrates "the distinctly anti-French nature of Italy's intervention in Spain" and reflects the same concerns that had underlain the agreement of March 1934—namely, to prevent any possibility of French troops being transferred from North Africa to France via Spain. So much so that M. Toscano rightly wrote that it constituted "nothing of great significance" and certainly did not compensate Italy for the military efforts it had already made—and above all for those it would make to aid Franco—nor, even more so, for the risks and damage that such support inflicted on its international diplomatic standing.[101]

98 It should be noted that when Hitler said he was willing to send even "troop units," Ciano told him that "at the time of the battle for the Balearic Islands, we had already prepared two battalions of Blackshirts." This demonstrates the "diligence" of the Militia. See ibid., p. [illegible number].

During the very days when the agreement was being negotiated, the Francoist side began recruiting Italian volunteers for the Foreign Legion, and the Italian side began discussing sending units—up to a division—of Blackshirts to Spain.[102] At that moment, however, this was apparently not Mussolini's intention. On December 6, he held a meeting at Palazzo Venezia devoted to the situation in Spain, attended by Ciano, the three military undersecretaries, the head of the SIM, and, representing the Germans, Admiral Canaris. From the account that has come down to us,103 it is clear that the "Duce" advocated for an intensification of aircraft deliveries and for the deployment of up to eight submarines to blockade Republican Mediterranean ports (Ciano even argued that there should be one per port), but he stated that large military units must be prepared immediately, but sent only if the Soviets sent their own in return.

The Duce—as stated in the report—believes that the Soviets will not send large military units. It is, of course, to be expected that the USSR will intensify the shipment of military supplies. In order to be prepared for any eventuality, the Head of Government deems it necessary:

1) that Italy and Germany, in light of the Spanish situation, prepare large military units, without, however, sending them immediately;

2) that military personnel, both Italian and German, be sent in small groups to Spain and integrated into the Foreign Legion or other Spanish units, depending on the various technical and military needs of Nationalist Spain;

3) that a division be formed in Italy and another in Germany, respectively, and that arrangements be made to send them to Spain only once it has been precisely ascertained that the USSR has dispatched military contingents to the “red zone”;

4) that the large reserves of men which, to the best of his knowledge, General Franco has at his disposal be trained by German and Italian officers and supplemented primarily by officers from various branches (artillery, engineers, aviation, etc.);

5) that an Italian-German General Staff direct and coordinate operations alongside the Spanish General Staff;

6) that the destruction of the enemy’s vital centers be carried out by any means necessary.

At this moment—says the Duce—we must carry out a true “race to the sea.” It is my conviction that the solution to the Spanish situation can be achieved from the sea. That is, on the day we have blockaded the “red” ports of the Mediterranean, the government in Valencia will realize that the game is lost. We must bear in mind that, in both Italy and Germany, it takes two months to mobilize the major units. During this period, above all, we must make any traffic in the Mediterranean toward Spain impossible, using aircraft and submarines in the most effective manner.

During the meeting, Admiral Canaris did not request the deployment of any Italian troops. In accordance with what the military attaché in Berlin had already reported to Rome in the days immediately preceding the meeting—and what Magistrati and the naval attaché would confirm in the days that followed104—Canaris—while agreeing with the directives set forth by Mussolini—was primarily concerned with making it clear that Germany had no intention of committing itself as fully as Italy. Regarding the possible deployment of a German division, he cited two difficulties: the “enormous number of transport ships (at least 60 steamers)” that the deployment would require and the fact that it would attract the attention “of the European naval powers and, above all, of England.” As for the naval blockade, he argued that it was necessary to increase the number of submarines planned, but he also stated that he believed it was right “for the task of the blockade to be entrusted to Italy.” In short, once they were certain that the Italians were determined to commit fully, the Germans began to back away and shift the greater political and military burden of aiding Franco onto Rome.05. Given these circumstances, and since nothing had occurred in the days immediately following that might have led Mussolini to reconsider his intentions—much less the arrival of Soviet troops or appeals from Franco or the SIM mission in Spain—the fact that on December 10 the “Duce” decided to send three thousand Blackshirts “to bolster the Spanish nationalist forces” and that a few days later —without Mussolini having issued any further instructions—Palazzo Chigi asked the Militia to prepare a second contingent, seems to us to be explained above all by the pressure (and preparations) that had long been underway in this regard on the part of the Militia106 and by their convergence with the desire to

104 On December 2, 1936, Colonel E. Marras had informed the SIM that only Göring was in favor of a “covert Italian-German intervention on a larger scale, from which, with optimism befitting his enthusiastic temperament, he anticipated swift successes.” Military leaders and Hitler himself, on the other hand, were much more cautious and did not want to risk complications. “Hitler,” Marras wrote, “believes that rather than continuing the race with Russia to send reinforcements to Spain—thereby expanding the theater of operations and increasing casualties—it would be better to thwart Russian movements at their source, for example, through diplomatic action aimed at prohibiting the passage of Soviet ships carrying arms and ammunition through the Mediterranean. He believes that such action—

to be carried out through a forum yet to be determined (the Non-Intervention Committee, the British government?)—should be undertaken by Italy, drawing on its recognized Mediterranean interests, while German intervention in this regard would reinforce the current suspicions regarding Germany's truly peaceful intentions." On December 18, M. Magistrati in turn informed Ciano that the German stance regarding an intensification of joint Italian-German action in Spain did not appear "perfectly clear and definitive" and that Berlin gave the impression of being reluctant to commit further unless a way could be found to give its intervention "some semblance of legality, in a more precise and internationally legal form than that provided by the formula of the 'struggle against Bolshevism.'" Four days later, the naval attaché in Berlin reported that he had been forced to intervene directly with Canaris to ensure compliance with the commitments made in Rome on December 6, even regarding the delivery of aircraft. All three documents are preserved in the E. Faldella Archive.

Ciano (who had by then centralized management of the operation within the Foreign Ministry's Spain Office) was determined to fast-track the intervention in Spain, convinced that it would be decisive and that delaying it would entail the risk of no longer being able to carry it out because, in the meantime, Italy might find itself—either during negotiations for the "gentlemen's agreement" or within the London Committee for Non-Intervention— in a position where it would have to accept some measure aimed at blocking foreign aid to the two warring parties. Two facts confirm this view. The decision was made without first discussing the matter with Franco and despite knowing that the Generalissimo was opposed to it—so much so that when, on December 14, Colonel Faldella informed him of the first deployment, he protested vehemently, exclaiming indignantly: "Quien los pidió?" And, in response to Faldella's embarrassed replies, he added, "When you send troops to a friendly country, you at least ask for permission!" 107. And that the Blackshirts, once they arrived in Spain, were not used to bolster the Spanish troops—that is, to create mixed units—but were deployed independently.

With the arrival in Cádiz, at the end of December, of the first battalions of the Militia, the Italian intervention in Spain entered a new phase—one that was politically and militarily far more demanding than the two previous ones: the phase that had seen the dispatch of the first twelve S. 81 units at the end of July, and the subsequent phase, during the months of August through December, which—though marked by increasing aid to the rebels and recognition of their government—had nevertheless still been characterized by a certain formal "caution." With the dispatch of the first Blackshirts, even this "caution" was set aside.

At first, Ciano had focused primarily on a swift victory for Franco and, with this in mind, on the domestic and international "neutralization" of the Blum government, so as to make it difficult for it to provide substantial aid to the Republicans, while Italy and Germany—pending the non-intervention negotiations—would continue to aid the Nationalists. The instructions he sent to Grandi on September 7 are clear:[108]

The Duce believes that, from the very first meetings of the Control Committee, you must take direct action to bind France to neutrality. That is, demand that control be established in an effective and direct manner. If the proposal is not accepted, each party will resume, or continue, its freedom of action, and the responsibility will lie with France.

107 In the E. Faldella Archive. See also R. Cantalupo, *Fu la Spagna*, op. cit., p. 108, and what Cantalupo himself recounted on March 6, 1943, to G. Bottai, *Diario*, f. 1447, which confirms Faldella's account and demonstrates how Franco continued to be troubled by the matter.

If, on the other hand, it is accepted, the rifts within the French government will deepen. And within the

Spanish Popular Front, a conflict will arise between the extreme elements—anarchists and communists—and the others, since the former will accuse the democracies of having abandoned them to their fate and of having shirked their responsibilities at the moment of struggle. The first signs of this are already evident: the recent defeats of the Reds are now followed by recriminations against Blum and against the Soviet government itself, whose protectors and allies are deemed inadequate. In San Sebastián, anarchists and socialists have exchanged gunfire. Any action we take now to emphasize that Blum's Franco-Jewish government was the initiator of neutrality—thereby abandoning the similar government in Madrid—will certainly serve to exacerbate the friction that already exists among these allies and, consequently, to accelerate their collapse.

In the very early stages, it cannot even be ruled out that Ciano had deluded himself into thinking he could somehow avail himself of England's "complicity," exploiting for this purpose its fears of a European crisis and of a radical shift to the left within the republican regime. As soon as it became clear that, despite these fears, London was not willing to deviate from its policy of substantial agreement with Paris and to give Rome and Berlin free rein in their policy of supporting the Nationalists, all of Ciano's efforts were directed toward trying to paralyze the British government's actions by leveraging the threat of a Soviet presence in the Mediterranean and the Bolshevization of Spain and, subsequently, of Europe. Soviet aid to the Republicans and the mobilization of the "left" in defense of the Republic had thus become his main arguments for putting the British government in a difficult position vis-à-vis conservative and moderate British and international public opinion and for justifying, to some extent, Italian, German, and Portuguese aid. The spearhead of this effort had been Grandi within the Non-Intervention Committee. Although lengthy, it is worth quoting here the portion of the report he delivered to the Grand Council on November 18 to illustrate his actions:[111]

From the very first meetings of the Non-Intervention Committee, in accordance with the directives given to me by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, I declared that Italy intended to establish effective and rigorous oversight of the Non-Intervention Agreement.

The German and Portuguese representatives, though initially reluctant, aligned themselves with the Italian position. This declaration on our part immediately achieved the result that Minister Ciano had foreseen in his instructions. Both England and France had constructed the framework of the Non-Intervention Committee with overly hasty enthusiasm, above all believing that neither Italy,

110 To this end, the Italian embassy in London had immediately mobilized to advise and assist the emissaries sent by Franco to the English capital (including the Duke of Alba) to work within conservative circles and foster a current of sympathy and support for the nationalists. See L. Vitelli Archive, Vitetti to Ciano, August 25, 1936.

neither Germany nor Portugal would have accepted control measures. This would have implicitly given the French government—and indeed the British government—an easy and convenient pretext to justify an intervention, however limited, alongside the so-called legitimate social-communist government in Madrid. Italy's timely declaration in favor of control threw the French and British plans off course and earned us another precious month in Spain. This is undoubtedly the first concrete and positive result of the position taken by Italy. We thus reached early October, and it was only at this point that Russia entered the scene... [which], breaking from the reserve it had maintained until then within the Non-Intervention Committee, launched a verbal and demagogic offensive against the alleged fascist interventions by Italy, Germany, and Portugal in support of General Franco.

The British government, as usual, showed clear signs of supporting—albeit subtly and indirectly—

Soviet Russia's new campaign against Italy and Germany, to the point that the British government itself presented a series of complaints against Italy and Germany, thereby endorsing the accusations made in Geneva by the so-called Spanish Foreign Minister, del Vayo. I informed the Duce of this Anglo-Soviet maneuver, and the Duce, in a phone call I will find it hard to forget, ordered me to "break the glass"; and at the session on October 9, in obedience to his instructions, I shattered them by launching a violent counterattack against both England and Soviet Russia with documentation and counter-accusations that made the deepest impression on the entire British public.

This counterattack of October 9 was followed by four others against Soviet Russia, to hold Moscow's communism strictly accountable, to respond to Soviet accusations, and to prevent France and England from openly siding with the Moscow government...

I will limit myself to briefly outlining some of what I consider to be the results achieved at least to date:

1) Faced with the resolute stance of Fascist Italy and our accusation that it was in contact with Russia, England once again did what it always does when confronted by those who show a strong and firm hand. It no longer dared to side with Russia, which it abandoned completely to its fate, nor did it dare to oppose us.

2) The aim was also to paralyze France. Faced with Fascist Italy's unyielding and decisive attack against Soviet Russia, the French government did not dare to take a stance in defense of Russian Bolshevism, which, on the one hand, would have permanently discredited it in the eyes of the world, and on the other, would have made France's relations with Italy even more difficult and delicate than they already are. Thus, as a result of Italy's decisive and violent action, we witnessed an initial fracture in Franco-Soviet solidarity within the Non-Intervention Committee… The Russian plan to create a sort of Franco-Anglo-Russian united front regarding the Spanish issue has completely failed.

On the other hand (and this is the third outcome), we have established a united front of three fascist countries: Italy, Germany, and Portugal, which have aligned themselves with Italy, thereby establishing concrete solidarity not only regarding the Spanish issue but also against communism, reaffirming once again that in the anti-communist war, Italian Fascism not only holds a historic priority but also possesses the strength to lead other countries in this struggle. It was not Germany that dragged us into the anti-communist struggle. It was we who, in the Spanish question, dragged Germany in...

By consistently exposing Russia's complicity in the Spanish anarchy, we have emboldened all those in England who seek to oppose an alliance with Russia, and we have carried out effective and excellent Fascist propaganda...

The shift to full-scale military intervention marked a decisive qualitative leap in Fascist policy toward Spain. In theory, however, this was not intended to alter either the spirit or the prospects of that policy, but merely to make it "compatible" with the developments in international negotiations aimed at the effective implementation of the agreements in principle regarding non-intervention in the civil war. Indeed, this development must be viewed with constant reference to the stages of those negotiations and their most significant dates—first and foremost January 25, the day on which the Italian government announced its intention to prohibit the recruitment and departure of volunteers, provided that other countries did the same and an effective system of controls was agreed upon; February 20, the day on which Rome announced it would put this intention into effect; and March 8, when the London Committee for Non-Intervention approved the control plan and set its entry into force five days later "2. If one fails to realize this, one misses the opportunity to understand that, in sending the first units of

the Blackshirts, neither Mussolini nor Ciano intended to launch an intervention that would be so protracted, so demanding militarily and economically, and so fraught with political consequences—one destined to have a massive impact on the entire framework of their foreign policy. So much so that one might reasonably wonder whether their decision (and especially Mussolini's) would have been the same had they foreseen it.

By sending the first full-strength units, Ciano's idea—typical of his "realism" and "astuteness"—and, once the final uncertainties had gradually been overcome, Mussolini's as well, was to present Franco with a fait accompli, induce him to immediately accept further shipments that would enable him to accelerate operations and bring about a decisive turning point in the conflict; and, immediately afterward, to put an end to direct intervention and become advocates of a total international blockade of all forms of aid to the two warring parties, leaving

113 It is likely that what helped Mussolini overcome his final hesitations was the insistence and confidence with which many politicians, journalists, and military figures maintained that a modest Italian intervention would be decisive. A case in point is what Luigi Barzini wrote in early November from Salamanca to Barella, the editor of *Il popolo d'Italia*, in a letter that Mussolini read on December 15, 1936: "To think that one or two divisions of an army like ours would cut through everything like a knife through butter, and in a couple of months would finish their march with a general sweep all the way to the coast" (ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence [1922–1943], 241/R, file "Luigi Barzini," sub. 2).

Thus, the Generalissimo was in a position to complete the operations against the "Reds" without too much difficulty. He was also ready to withdraw his own "volunteers" at this point, provided that the same could be arranged for those fighting in the Republican ranks. From this perspective, even Germany's participation in the operation became, in a certain sense, secondary—desirable from a military standpoint, less so from a political one, both specifically[114] and generally—since, as we shall see, the "breakthrough" in the civil war was to be accompanied, in Mussolini's and Ciano's plans, by a large-scale relaunch of Italian policy toward England. The best evidence that this was the "strategic" concept* on which the actual intervention in Spain was based is found in the "summary" of the conclusions reached by Mussolini and Göring during their meeting at Palazzo Venezia on the afternoon of January 14, 1933. It reads115:

The decisions in the "summary" must be supplemented by the operational resolutions adopted the following day at a meeting held at Palazzo Chigi by Ciano with the undersecretaries of the three military ministries—Pariani, Cavagnari, and Valle—the Chief of Staff of the MVSN, Russo, Admiral Biancher, Pietro-Marchi, head of the Spain Office, and F. Anfuso. At that meeting, a minimum intervention plan was decided upon, to be implemented by January 31 (000 Blackshirts with two months' worth of supplies and 30 aircraft), and a maximum plan, to be implemented—if international circumstances permitted—by February 10 (approximately 11,000 additional men and, if necessary, 12 additional assault aircraft). The political and military proposals from Palazzo Chigi are highly important and significant. Here they are:

"1) The international community—under British pressure—is actively striving to bring the conflict in Spain to an end.

As far as we are concerned, this must end with the triumph of the Nationalists.

2) Of the measures that could be adopted internationally to attempt pacification, a blockade is the

one that appears to be practically feasible.

On our part, therefore, we must have sufficient men, weapons, and supplies on Spanish soil before the blockade is imposed. Not only that, but we must avoid any waste, given the difficulty we would face in resupplying men, weapons, and ammunition.

3) Waste is avoided through sound command and control, and this is what we must emphasize above all else: there must be a General Staff that functions to draw up plans, prepare resources, and coordinate actions until the objective is achieved.

Above all, it must constantly be borne in mind that the greatest expenditure and the least benefit always result from the piecemeal use of resources for minor operations, while the greatest economy comes from concentrating resources to strike the enemy violently and thoroughly, persisting until his annihilation is achieved.

Every pause is a breather, a prolongation of the struggle.

4) The Italian contingent must be deployed as a unified force for large-scale operations.

It is therefore necessary that it be placed under the command of one of our generals, who must have broad freedom of action to operate, as he deems best, toward achieving the objectives set for him by the command of the Spanish forces (General Franco).

Oppose any tendency to deploy forces by spreading them out across broad fronts.

5) The Italian contingent must be deployed along decisive axes.

Obviously, these can only be determined on the ground, based on the situation. From the perspective we have here, the following axes of some importance appear to be:

a) Teruel-Valencia, objective: to separate Catalonia from the rest of Spain and then advance in the direction that the situation indicates as most opportune, capitalizing on success to decide the outcome of the conflict.

The operation from Teruel to Valencia should be preceded by a bombing campaign

i) Germany and Italy are still driven by the desire to ensure Franco’s victory.

2) However, the fact that aid is being provided to him must not lead Franco to inaction or give him hope that Italy and Germany will wage war on his behalf for their own interests.

3) Franco will once again be reminded of the substantial material and moral support he has received thus far from the two countries. A final major contribution from Italy (troops and supplies) and Germany (supplies) will be made by January 31.

4) In order to buy time until January 31 for this aid, a stalling tactic will be adopted on the diplomatic front. To this end, Germany and Italy will reach a precise agreement on how to respond to the latest British note and on the instructions to be given to their ambassadors for the negotiations within the Non-Intervention Committee.

5) As soon as the relief effort outlined above is completed by the end of January, the total closure of Spain will be proposed, and a joint plan for the blockade will be presented.

6) Strong pressure will be exerted on Franco to induce him to accelerate his operations and to make full use of the extensive resources at his disposal. It seems desirable to place a German-Italian General Staff at his side, with the aim of inducing him to carry out military operations in an appropriate manner.

7) The Navy will continue its intelligence operations and ensure the security of transport.

8) Germany and Italy will not, under any circumstances, allow themselves to be led by other powers into a situation that could give rise to international complications.

As of December 31, 1936, Italy had sent approximately 10,000 men to aid the Nationalists, the vast majority (7,848) of whom were Blackshirts. A little over a month and a half later, on February 18, their number had risen to (with ships and aircraft arriving by sea) off Valencia, raising fears of a landing. This is intended to draw the enemy's forces and resources to that area.

Also with the aim of facilitating the conduct of these operations, a sudden and intense strafing and bombing campaign by aircraft should be carried out—at the outset of the action—against Cuenca, where it appears that the Reds' motorized units are concentrated, capable of maneuvering in the direction of both Teruel and Madrid.

b) Siguenza-Guadalajara, to strike Madrid from the rear and proceed to encircle it, should it still be worthwhile.

c) Malaga.

The operation against Málaga has, in addition to its moral impact, a local objective—of logistical value—to provide us with a closer base. This objective would, of course, lose all significance if the blockade were implemented. The operation could, however, still have a positive effect if we did not limit ourselves to occupying the city but capitalized on our success by advancing eastward as far as possible, as far as the situation and our resources permit.

"Evidently, of the three operations, the first is truly decisive in nature, but precisely for this reason it should be appropriately integrated into a complex operation by Spanish forces that would pin down the enemy in every sector. This would allow the main force launched along that axis to fully capitalize on the success by advancing as rapidly as possible toward Valencia.

"Should the Spanish command agree to this plan, it would be necessary to calculate the time required for preparation and specify the start of the operation, taking into account any support from the sea and the air." These two documents are also preserved in the E. Faldella Archive.

48,823, of whom 29,006 were Blackshirts, the rest being army personnel. To gain a comprehensive picture of Rome's efforts to bring the conflict to a swift conclusion, one must add to these figures more than one hundred aircraft (a total of 248 from the start of the military uprising through February 18), more than 400 cannons and 600 mortars (a total of 542 and 756, respectively), about forty tanks (81 in total) and over 3,000 vehicles (3,783 in total), a large number of small arms, ammunition, and various

pieces of equipment, as well as naval, merchant, and warships used to transport this mass of men and materials, to escort them, and to blockade Republican ports.

Despite this truly remarkable effort and despite the equally remarkable assistance in the form of supplies provided by the Germans, the Spanish Civil War did not—as is well known—experience, either in the first half of 1937 or for much of the following year, the decisive turning point that Mussolini and Ciano had anticipated and upon which they had based their political strategy. And Italy, instead of extricating itself within a few months, found itself increasingly embroiled in the conflict, with no possibility of withdrawing except by becoming ever more deeply involved, in order to support the Nationalists and lead them as quickly as possible to their long-awaited victory.

At first, in February, the capture of Málaga—in which Italian troops (the CTV, or Corpo Truppe Volontarie, as they were called) played the most important role—seemed to confirm all the most optimistic predictions. A month later, however, the failure of the offensive on Guadalajara not only dampened all enthusiasm but also provoked in Rome—and especially in Mussolini—a reaction so intense and, all things considered, so exaggerated that it disrupted the limited strategy that had been devised up to that point to resolve the Spanish question and had repercussions on the entire fascist foreign policy.

This is not the place to delve into the technical and military aspects of the Battle of Guadalajara, nor to discuss the causes (the offensive's earlier-than-planned start compared to the Italian command's plans, poor training of the troops, deficiencies in junior officers and in organization in general, lack of support from Nationalist troops on the Jarama, etc.117) of the Italian defeat. This is all the more true given that from the perspective of

117 At the Council of Ministers on April 10, Mussolini succinctly outlined the causes of the defeat as follows: "The participation of our divisions in the battle on the Madrid front," Bottai summarized in his Diary, ff. 526 ff., "appears to have taken place against his advice. "A maxim to keep in mind: never abandon the sector where success has already been achieved." He is alluding to the victory at Málaga. "My strategy—'the race to the sea'—should have been pursued to the very end. From Málaga to Almería; and then on to Cartagena and Alicante, gradually narrowing the enemy's coastal front. Thus narrowing their supply bases from the sea." He is referring to the air force. Another maxim: "He who is able to concentrate forces in the sky wins on the ground." The Battle of Guadalajara: "The soldier was heroic. A legion of Blackshirts charged into the fire with the military band leading the way. Command errors:

from a purely military standpoint, this had nothing dramatic about it,1W so much so that under other circumstances it certainly would not have had the resonance, significance, and consequences that it did. In the eyes of anti-fascists around the world, Guadalajara took on a value and significance that went far beyond its actual military scope: after fifteen years of continuous victories and apparent invincibility, fascism had been defeated, and it had been defeated by a popular, anti-fascist army in whose ranks Italian anti-fascists also fought; contrary to what so many believed, fascism could indeed be defeated: Guadalajara stood as proof of this and pointed the way forward—not the path of resignation and surrender, but that of struggle and victory. In short, from a military event, Guadalajara immediately became a political event—a major political event that sparked enthusiasm throughout the anti-fascist movement, heartened a good number of skeptics and doubters, and dealt a devastating blow to the prestige of fascism and Mussolini. Nor, on an entirely different front, should its repercussions and consequences among the Nationalists—and on relations between them and the Italians—be underestimated. From an immediate military standpoint, Guadalajara was a setback not only for the

Italians but, obviously, also for the Nationalists; psychologically and politically, however, the defeat suffered by the CTV ultimately proved not entirely unwelcome to them “9. Psychologically, it served to temper the sense of superiority that animated the Italians and to restore the pride of the Spaniards, which had been wounded by the unsolicited arrival of Italian troops and by the Italians’ claim that they alone could resolve the conflict and teach the Spaniards how it should be done. Politically, it served, on the one hand, to block possible unwelcome internal Italian interference—such as the actual or alleged interference that had manifested itself during Farinacci’s mission—and, on the other hand, to strengthen Franco’s position (“in a civil war, a systematic occupation accompanied by the necessary ‘limpieza’ is worth more than a swift rout of the armies that leaves the country still infested with adversaries,” as he had said on February 13 to the colonel: men thrown into the fire after a thirty-kilometer march without rest—clothed for a southern climate, in sub-zero temperatures—trucks driven to the front lines—the air force was unable to fly due to heavy snowfall. But, above all, the shortcomings of the subordinates; heroic, perhaps, but lacking skill. “This is the weak point of our military organization”… Mussolini then alludes to the difficulty of the “war of doctrines.” “There is no immediate element of defending the territory, the soil, the homeland, the home, or the family. It is not easy to foster a military consciousness in a war of doctrines.” What must be done now. “I have sent General Bastico. The best we had at our disposal. His orders: revenge, at any cost.” Repercussions in Italy: “At one point I said to Starace: ‘Let’s see if the wine of the squadristi, which we’ve been saving for so long, is still good. Open a few bottles. The wine is still excellent. A few heads were smashed, quite a few radios. Everything is in order.’”

Faldella120) in the face of Italian pressure for a more dynamic conduct of operations.

The repercussions of Guadalajara, however, were not limited to Spanish politics alone. The defeat occurred at a time when—anticipating the imminent victorious resolution of the Spanish Civil War—Rome was preparing the ground to resume talks with London. The now-imminent May session of the League of Nations was viewed in this light as a decisive step. If that session had resolved the final lingering issues of the Ethiopian question, the talks with London could have proceeded on a more concrete basis than that on which the gentlemen’s agreement had been reached and could have led to the comprehensive agreement that Mussolini had never given up on—and which, in the new European situation brought about by the remilitarization of the Rhineland and the renewed display of German assertiveness toward Austria, both he and Ciano felt was increasingly urgent and necessary to extricate Italian foreign policy from the quagmire into which the Ethiopian conflict had led it. This was all the more true given that in the British political landscape—and particularly within the Conservative Party—there were signs suggesting that even in London there were those inclined toward a revision of the policy toward Italy that the Foreign Office had pursued thus far. With this in mind, Rome was pursuing various initiatives, some aimed at directly preparing the ground in London, while others, of a broader scope, were intended to strengthen Italy’s position in Europe vis-à-vis both Germany and, indirectly, England itself, so that at the opportune moment it could sit at the negotiating table for a general agreement under the terms that Mussolini and Ciano deemed most advantageous. Among the former was the trip Mussolini was making to Libya during the very days of the Guadalajara Conference (March 12–21, 1937); among the latter, the most important was certainly the agreement that Ciano was about to sign with Yugoslavia.

As Segré 121 has rightly noted, Mussolini’s visit to Libya was intended, politically and for propaganda purposes, above all to preview the new colonization program for the “fourth shore” that the regime was about to launch and to highlight to the fullest extent its initial achievements, in particular the completion of the Libyan coastal highway (the so-called Via Balbia) that ran the entire length of the colony from

120 This statement is cited by Gen. E. Faldella in his previously mentioned “private review” of J. L. Alcofar Nassaes’s book on the CTV; as well as, more extensively, what Franco told R. Cantalupo. See *Fu la Spagna*, op. cit., pp. 230 ff., on the eve of his return to Italy.

border with Tunisia to that with Egypt and was intended to serve as the backbone of its development (but also as a military route of primary importance). This does not detract from the fact that the visit also fit well within the context of the hoped-for imminent resumption of talks with London. At least, that was the view according to Mussolini and Ciano’s logic, according to which the best way to reach an agreement was to appear strong and uncompromising and, not infrequently, to threaten those one wished to bring to the negotiating table.

Through his presence and the solemn announcement of the regime’s decision to proceed with the mass colonization of Libya, the “Duce” sought to emphasize two things: on the one hand, Italy’s determination to transform its colonies into a peaceful and flourishing empire, and on the other, the ever-increasing importance of the Mediterranean for Italy in this context. The various speeches he delivered during the visit and the interviews he gave to the foreign press are extremely significant. On March 17, speaking in Tripoli, he sought to allay concerns that his visit, the Italian naval maneuvers in the central Mediterranean that he was to observe during his return journey (and which were said to be aimed at blocking communications between Gibraltar and Suez), the fortification work undertaken on Pantelleria and in the Aegean, and reports of imminent deployments of new troops to Libya had stirred up in various countries—and especially in England122:

122 A few days before Mussolini’s departure for Libya, on March 9, the Chicago-based Press Tribune news agency issued a report from London that aptly summarized these fears: “The British are angered by Mussolini’s trip to Libya, where he will observe naval maneuvers intended to test the Italian fleet’s ability to blockade the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to Suez.

“From the British perspective, these naval maneuvers, coupled with the dispatch of so-called Italian ‘volunteers’ to Spain and the recent order prohibiting foreign aircraft from flying over Pantelleria (an island being heavily fortified by the Italians), have rendered the much-vaunted Mediterranean ‘Gentlemen’s Agreement’ a dead letter.

“On the other hand, from the Italian perspective, the Mediterranean agreement is already a dead letter due to Britain’s massive rearmament.

“The militarist elements in London are now adding further visible justifications for British participation in a future general European war.

“The number one cause would be a repeat of the events of 1914—that is, an unprovoked attack by Germany on Belgium or France.

“The second cause would be a possible German aggression in southeastern Europe.

“And finally, the third cause is provided by some attempt by Mussolini to close off the Mediterranean, because he has said he is capable of doing so.

“Great Britain is setting its sights on Egypt, Palestine, and the Suez Canal, because England—just as France is—is troubled by the new Libyan road that runs from Tunisia to Egypt.

“For a long time now, there has been a suspicion here that Mussolini has no particular interests in Spain —neither commercial nor political—and that therefore the large forces sent there have strategic aims, namely the aim that these forces—under certain circumstances—might lend a hand to Italy’s attempt to keep Italy’s enemies away from the Mediterranean.

“Finally, the British fear that Italy is seeking to encourage uprisings among the Arabs of Palestine—that is, at the other end of the Mediterranean—to which must be added the imminent attempt to

“This constant, neurotic alarmism, this sowing of panic and suspicion,” he said,123 “certainly does not serve the cause of peace, because it deeply disturbs the atmosphere among peoples.

This voyage is imperialist in the sense that virile peoples have always understood, understand, and will continue to understand that word. But it has no hidden designs or aggressive aims against anyone. Both within and outside the Mediterranean, we wish to live in peace with everyone and offer our cooperation to those who demonstrate the same willingness.

We are arming ourselves at sea, in the air, and on land, because this is our imperative duty in the face of others’ armaments, but the Italian people demand to be left in peace, for they are engaged in a long and arduous struggle.

And the following day, to the correspondent of the *Daily Mail*, Ward Price,[124] he reaffirmed his desire for peace, repeating that “from a colonial standpoint,” Italy was, after the conquest of Ethiopia, “satisfied” and ready “to reach an amicable settlement with Great Britain on all matters it wished to address regarding the territories bordering our possessions” and to cooperate with all European colonial nations for the development of Africa, “a continent that complements Europe and is necessary to its economic interests.” He also spoke in the most conciliatory terms regarding Europe: he reiterated that Italy had no intention whatsoever of securing bases in the Balearic Islands or in Spanish Morocco, that it “has not done and will not do anything that might even indirectly violate Spain’s territorial integrity,” and that, following the end of the civil war, “it has no intention whatsoever of interfering in Spanish affairs.” Nor did he rule out the possibility that the Italian “volunteers” might return fairly soon, should a general agreement be reached “to withdraw from Spain the others as well, who are infinitely more numerous.” Finally, regarding a new Locarno Agreement, to block off this stretch of sea where it is barely 100 miles wide, from the African coast to Europe.

“ On the open sea, the British do not consider the airplane a threat to the Navy, but in a fairly narrow stretch of water, the danger posed by aviation is real; and in the Mediterranean, there are more than a few points suitable for air and submarine attacks against all kinds of ships, both merchant and warships.

“ For all these reasons, there is a conviction that Mussolini is firmly resolved to test the conditions under which Italy might eventually succeed in controlling the entire Mediterranean.

“Doubts persist regarding the future policies of the dictatorial states, Italy and Germany; doubts that the differences between them have not been resolved even by recent events. However, military observers do not believe that Italy is prepared to challenge England on its own by attempting to close off the Mediterranean. But if Germany—as suspected in some diplomatic circles—has designs on southeastern Europe, it is possible that Italy could secure a valuable service from Germany, namely, having Germany cover its flanks at sea; thus, Italy could announce the closure of the Mediterranean. It is

precisely these possibilities that are said to have prompted England to embark on such a colossal rearmament program: and many pundits now assert that the British want to be strong enough to keep the Germans at bay, so as to be able to crush Mussolini, whom they failed to topple in 1935."

"Italy," he said, "is ready to do everything possible to reach a conclusion, and the agreement can be facilitated by the creation of the Rome-Berlin axis. This axis, however, was not created to provoke unrest in Europe, but to impose peace and order there."

On the same day, however, upon receiving the "sword of Islam" as a gift from a group of Libyan dignitaries, he did not limit himself to assuring them that Rome would soon demonstrate in concrete terms its concern for the "ever-improving destiny" of its Muslim populations,[125] but—albeit in passing—he also wished to recall Italy's "sympathy" for "Muslims throughout the world,"[26]. This remark might have had no particular significance and been merely circumstantial, but at that political juncture, it could also have carried—and was in fact understood as such—for some, and above all for England, the weight of a threat or, if one prefers, an "exhortation" to come to an agreement with Italy if it did not want Italy to create difficulties for it in the Arab world, as it had already done in '35–'36 and as it was still continuing to do to some extent through Radio Bari broadcasts and a series of covert maneuvers in Egypt, in Palestine and Iraq with local anti-British and pan-Arab movements, and even in Saudi Arabia and, to an even greater extent, in Yemen, through efforts to infiltrate and provide aid to those governments traditionally considered by the British to be part of their imperial sphere of influence.[127]

With regard to all these initiatives, it is necessary to be very clear, both to understand their true nature and to grasp the modus operandi and contradictions of Fascist policy during this period. See

125 For the consequences for the indigenous population of the new Fascist policy of colonization in Libya, see C. G. Ségré, *L'Italia in Libia*, op. cit., pp. 168 ff. Within the framework of this new policy, on November 30, 1938, the Grand Council, upon Balbo's proposal, decided that the four Libyan provinces would become an integral part of the Kingdom's territory, extended the syndicalistand established a special citizenship for native Muslims who, in addition to being at least eighteen years of age, having no criminal convictions involving restrictions on personal liberty, and having applied for it, were able to read and write Italian, had earned military or civil merits in the service of Italy, or had been members of the Arab Youth of the Littorio for at least one year. See "Foglio d'ordini," December 1, 1938, as well as Royal Decree-Law No. 70 of January 9, 1939, which implemented the resolution. Despite these measures, Italians maintained a clearly dominant position in Libya with respect to the indigenous population, including those enjoying the new citizenship. See C. G. Segré, *L'Italia in Libia*, op. cit., pp. 124 ff.

From a historical perspective, these measures appear to us today as virtually irrelevant and, in any case, devoid of concrete results; indeed, there is ample evidence to suggest that even in Rome they were regarded as nothing more than a general deterrent, with no prospects other than—and these were entirely instrumental—their future sacrifice on the altar of the much-desired general agreement with London. However, there was a belief that they might yield some immediate political benefit, given that the British had not yet recovered from the trauma that these actions—amid the frustration over their military impotence in the Mediterranean[128] — had inflicted upon them in '35–'36, and were still inclined to vastly overestimate their scale and danger, so that it was thought they would be eager to remove this thorn in their side. In reality, however, their effect was different. To the British public and to a large part of the British political leadership as well, these initiatives appeared not as a tactical ploy—a means of exerting pressure that Italy would set aside at the negotiating table—but as further proof that Mussolini, no matter what he proclaimed, was by no means "satisfied" and, intoxicated by his

success in Ethiopia, was planning to extend his empire into Egypt, Sudan, the Middle East, and across the Red Sea.[29] Hence, their outcome was entirely counterproductive to the very goal they were intended to help achieve.

Faced with these and other similar disruptive and coercive initiatives (during those same days, while Mussolini brandished the "sword of Islam," Ciano, following the same logic, was moving to ensure that his policy toward London had the deterrent and softening effect of an agreement with Japan 13°), it is natural to think of the spirit and methods that had characterized Fascist policy toward France in the second half of the 1920s: pursuing an anti-French policy in order to reach an agreement with France 131. In reality, while the spirit and methods were essentially the same when applied to policy toward England, they were now even more counterproductive and dangerous than they had been then. Given the increasingly limited time frames that Germany's growing dynamism and the ever-present threat of an Anglo-German agreement left for Italian political initiative, these methods in fact became not only counterproductive to the objectives sought but also a source of mistrust toward Italy even in those countries that were not prejudicially hostile to it or that, in any case, were in a position where they could not ignore Italy's political initiative, but—even more seriously—needed a string of continuous successes to achieve any results at all, successes that would reinforce the image of a powerful regime always victoriously on the offensive. As a result, even the most prudent and successful political operations (such as the one involving Yugoslavia) were exposed to the negative repercussions of any setback—even a minor one affecting only prestige, such as the one at Guadalajara.

128 Eloquent evidence of these frustrations can be found both in the press of the time (see, for example, what G. Ward Price wrote in the *Daily Mail* of May 28, 1936) and in subsequent authoritative memoirs (see, for example, D. Kelly, *The Ruling Few*, London 1952, pp. 170 ff.).

129 British archival sources—diplomatic and military—offer a vast body of documentation that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt the British gross overestimation of Italian action in Egypt and the Middle East, the extent of their fears, and the incredible conclusions these fears led to.

130 Until the war in Ethiopia, Italy's political stance toward the countries and events of the Far East had been fundamentally "colonial" in nature—that is, focused on protecting and developing Italian economic interests in the region and, above all, in China. Hence, a policy that was essentially "pro-Chinese." The first signs of change appeared in 1935–36, partly as a result of Japan's willingness to supply Italy with coal and gasoline, and partly due to the sympathies shown by certain Japanese military circles (especially the Navy), which were interested in weakening British power and drawing it into a greater commitment in the Mediterranean, in support of the Italian cause (see ACS, Ministry of Navy, Cabinet [1934–50], b. 175), and, finally, partly as a result of the conviction beginning to take hold at Palazzo Chigi (first expressed by Grandi in January 1936 in reference to the proceedings of the London Naval Conference) that it would be politically and militarily advantageous for Italy if Britain were engaged in the Far East. Hence the gradual emergence (though not without resistance, especially from certain economic circles whose political spokesperson was A. De Stefani) of an attitude that was no longer "colonial" in nature but politically motivated, and thus a gradual shift from the pro-Chinese policy pursued until then to a pro-Japanese one. After Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact (November 25, 1936), this new stance evolved into a quest for a similar agreement between Italy and Japan. In early 1937, some Japanese newspapers began, in turn, to report on Tokyo's intentions to expand the Anti-Comintern Pact to include other countries, among them Italy. See M. R. Godley, "Fascism and Chinese Nationalism: 1931–1938. Preliminary Notes on the Study of Italian-Chinese Relations during the Fascist Period," in *Storia Contemporanea*, December 1973, pp. 739 ff.; G. Borsa, "Attempts by Fascist Italy to Gain a Foothold in China: 1932–1937," in *Il Politico*, September

1979, pp. 381 ff.; V. Ferretti, “Italian Foreign Policy and Imperial Japan (January 1934–June 1937),” in *Storia contemporanea*, October 1979, pp. 873 ff.; id., Japanese Foreign Policy and Relations with Italy and Germany (1936–1939), ibid., December 1976, pp. 783 ff.

Relations with Yugoslavia had, up to that point, constituted one of the most troubled chapters in Fascist foreign policy, characterized by alternating phases but, on the whole, marked more by disagreement, controversy, and tension (including some very serious instances) than by agreement and détente. There had been—and still were—many reasons underlying these peculiarities and difficulties. First and foremost were the Treaty of Rapallo and, even earlier, the very creation of Yugoslavia, which many Fascists had never accepted—both because of their claim that the Adriatic was a sort of Italian “internal sea” and because they were firmly convinced that a number of Dalmatian localities “left” within Yugoslav borders were Italian. In and of itself, Dalmatian irredentism (though certainly more substantial than the Corsican, Nice, Savoyard, Maltese, and Ticino irredentism) never had any particular scope or influence, even though it had its own organizations and numerous publications that kept it alive and, in times of tension, regularly fueled anti-Yugoslav polemics, and it had a presence (especially through school textbooks) in the education of young people. In particular, during the years in question, it never had any real influence on the policies of Palazzo Chigi. That said, it must also be noted that, even though on some occasions it actually caused the regime some trouble, the regime—in keeping with its typical modus operandi aimed at keeping all options open for any eventuality—not only allowed it to exist undisturbed but also provided it with financial support and made extensive use of it whenever it deemed it useful for dramatizing relations with Belgrade and for attempting to mobilize Italian public opinion against Yugoslavia and France. Other reasons included Slavic irredentism (particularly strong in Venezia Giulia) and the regime’s policy of denationalizing the Slavic minority, often carried out with a harshness that was bound to provoke Yugoslav reactions and protests.[132]

However real they may have been, these reasons for controversy and, at times, conflict never reached the importance and significance of those sparked by the concerns and countermeasures prompted in Belgrade by Italy’s policy of penetration into Albania and, in Rome, by Yugoslavia’s ties to the Little Entente and to France.[133] At Palazzo Chigi, there were those who—both in the mid-1920s and later, when Grandi was foreign minister—would have liked to reach an agreement with Belgrade on a common policy toward Albania (and, if necessary, on a straightforward partition of Albania), especially in view of greater Italian involvement in Africa. This tendency, however, never managed to prevail over the one (which, despite a few moments of second thoughts on the part of the “Duce,” had Mussolini as its point of reference) that regarded the friendship between Belgrade and Paris (which took concrete form in November 1920 in a full-fledged treaty renewed for another five years in 1932) an obstacle to Italy’s Danube-Balkan policy and a danger of encirclement; it therefore viewed relations with Yugoslavia through the lens of those between Rome and Paris and, consequently, depending on the course of the latter, envisaged them in terms of either Belgrade’s estrangement from Paris or Belgrade’s neutralization

132 There is a lack of satisfactory comprehensive studies on this complex set of issues. Useful insights can be drawn from P. Pedace, *The Adriatic Question in the Press and Public Discourse Between the Two Wars*, Rome, n.d. [but 1977]; M. Pacor, *Eastern Border. The National Question and Resistance in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Milan 1964; E. Apih, Italy, Fascism, and Antifascism in Venezia Giulia (1918–1943), Bari 1966; L. Bermeli, Slovenes and Croats in Italy Between the Two Wars, Trieste 1974.

via Paris. Hence the practical absence of a coherent policy toward Yugoslavia, a series of frictions with England, and, to make matters worse, an engagement, from 1926–27 onward, in a series of contacts with anti-Serb irredentist movements—Macedonian and, above all, Croatian—which, although kept secret, obviously did not escape the attention of the Belgrade government and heightened fears and animosity toward Italian policy not only in Yugoslavia but also in many other capitals,[34]. And this was true even though, on the whole, these relations—while aimed at creating internal difficulties within Yugoslavia and securing allies in the event of a breakdown in relations with it—were primarily intended, initially, to keep these movements under control and prevent them from destabilizing the internal situation in Yugoslavia, and, subsequently, to prevent them from being co-opted by other governments with which they were also in contact—namely, the Hungarian and Nazi governments. B5. A typical example in this regard is the position of Grandi, who played a significant role in relations with these movements, especially the Croats. As his diary clearly attests, Grandi in fact regarded the Croats as a valuable tool for politically weakening Yugoslavia and, as such, worthy of support; however, he viewed the possibility of an independent Croatian state as the first step toward the reconstitution of Austria-Hungary and, from this perspective, a disaster for Italy. Nor did things

134 There is also a lack of truly in-depth comprehensive studies on the relationship between Fascism and Croatian separatism. The best work on the Ustaše movement is B. Krizman, *Ante Pavelic and the Ustaše*, Zagreb 1978. In addition to this, see G. Carocci, *The Foreign Policy of Fascist Italy*, op. cit., pp. 168 ff.; F. D'Amoja, *Declino e prima crisi dell'Europa di Versailles* (op. cit.), pp. 146 ff.; useful information can be found in T. Sala, Italian Bases of Croatian Separatism (1929–1941), in *Italian Imperialism and Yugoslavia: Proceedings of the Italian-Yugoslav Conference, Ancona, October 14–16, 1977*, Urbino 1981, pp. 283 ff.

While offering a rich and well-documented overview of the relationship between Fascism and Croatian separatism, these studies are limited in that they focus their attention solely on the Ustaše. In reality, after Radic's death, the Croatian Peasants' Party also maintained contacts with Rome, alongside the Ustaše. In particular, on October 13–14, 1929, A. Pavelic and A. Kossutic (secretary of that party) held two lengthy meetings with R. Forges Davanzali (who maintained contacts with the Croats, just as V. Gayda did with the Macedonians), who provided Grandi with a detailed report on the matter, which was brought to the attention of both the Minister of War, Gen. Gazzera, and the Minister of the Royal Household, Mattioli Pasqualini. See D. Grandi, Diary, entry for October 18, 1929, where various documents relating to the meeting are attached. In the D. Grandi Archive, b. 13, file 90, subfile 8.

135 Speaking of Fascist policy toward the Ustasha, F. Suvich writes the following in his Memoirs: "But why, if Mussolini did not want to use the Ustasha for operational or aggressive purposes, did he harbor and favor these compromising elements (whom he himself had defined as 'useless and dangerous')? The reason is clear to me, and it is certainly the true one: Mussolini, as has been mentioned several times, was terribly jealous of the dominance that the Germans—especially due to the relationship between King Alexander and Göring—were gaining in Yugoslavia. The Ustasha were not only a nuisance but also a source of concern for Yugoslavia, especially because the movement had gained strength on an international scale, while its leaders resided in Italy. The Ustasha served as what we would today call a "deterrent," intended to influence Yugoslavia into aligning itself with Italy rather than with Germany; the day this rapprochement with Italy took place, Mussolini would have cast the Ustasha overboard—as indeed happened after the massacre in Marseille—without a moment's hesitation. This role as a "deterrent" also explains why these Ustasha activities, instead of being kept secret and confidential, were practically flaunted."

They changed substantially after Grandi left Palazzo Chigi. As D'Amoja137 rightly wrote, the

“Croatian question” held far less importance in Italian foreign policy from 1932 to 1934 than one might be led to attribute to it by considering appearances rather than substance. It was a supporting tactic; a threat raised and left hanging; a means of exerting pressure and intimidation on the government in Belgrade. It was never a decisive or resolute course of action.

Given this very particular and reflexive approach to relations with Belgrade, and in light of the recurring tensions caused by Italian policy in Albania—including the rumors circulating about it (such as those, in early ’33, regarding an impending Italian-Albanian customs union) and by the difficulties of the internal Yugoslav situation—which more than once prompted Belgrade’s leaders to dramatize relations with Italy for domestic political purposes— which from late 1927 to late 1933 had been almost constantly strained, to the point that on several occasions (in the spring of 1928, in September 1930, and between December 1932 and January 1933) rumors had even circulated about a possible threat of conflict. A hint of détente on the Italian side had occurred only in early 1934, as a result of the improvement that was taking shape in Italian-French relations in 1938. The failed Nazi putsch in Vienna, the fears aroused by the increasingly cordial relations that Berlin was establishing (not only with the Ustaše but also with the government in Belgrade)139, and above all the further consolidation of the Italian-French rapprochement had, in the following months—as we have already seen140 — raised hopes that this rapprochement would materialize, all the more so since France and England were also pressing in the same direction. With his focus now entirely on Ethiopia and thus eager to cover his back and reach an agreement with Paris, Mussolini had wanted to contribute to this effort personally. At the end of August, in a meeting with the Yugoslav representative in Rome, Ducic, he had shown himself willing to reach an agreement, and on October 6 in Milan, he had publicly stated that he was convinced that, despite the controversies with which—in his view—the Yugoslav side was poisoning relations between the two countries, there were “precise factual conditions” for an understanding.[141] Three days later, however, in Marseille, the Ustaše had assassinated King Alexander and Barthou. Despite all of Laval’s efforts, Italian-Yugoslav relations had been deeply affected by this event. As Stojadinović wrote in his memoirs,142 no evidence of direct Italian involvement in the crime emerged either then or later. Ante Pavelic’s presence in Italy, the protection the Ustaše enjoyed there, the fact that the assassins had arrived in France from Italy, and Mussolini’s refusal to extradite Pavelic and two other Croats accused of organizing the massacre, however, clearly explain the anti-Italian sentiment that characterized Yugoslav public opinion in the following months and the abrupt halt to the process of détente that had just begun. The onset of the Ethiopian crisis, coupled with Yugoslavia’s firm adherence to the sanctions and the British system of Mediterranean containment of Italy, did the rest.

Once the Ethiopian affair was over, however, the context of Italian-Yugoslav relations had taken on a markedly different character. As in 1934, Rome still felt the need for an agreement. First, to regain the positions lost during the war in the Danube-Balkan region, block German penetration toward the southeast (and first and foremost into Yugoslavia itself), and seek to establish a “system” among the states concerned to sustain Austria’s precarious independence for as long as possible. Second, to reassure England and demonstrate both its own desire for peace and its willingness to cooperate independently to maintain the European balance of power, as well as the futility of England’s insistence on including France in any potential Anglo-Italian agreement. However, Belgrade now desired an agreement with equal intensity. Partly to regain the Italian market, which was indispensable for its exports (especially timber), and above all to counter Germany’s growing assertiveness, but also to make its position less dependent on agreements with the Little Entente (now in crisis) and with France. In the eyes of the Belgrade government, these remained the two cornerstones of Yugoslav policy; the new president, Stojadinović (who, moreover, did not share the pro-Soviet policy of Beneš and France and made no secret of his authoritarian tendencies—so much so that Ciano would describe him as “a fascist… if not… as an open party statement,… certainly because of his conception of state authority

and life" l45), realized, however, that these alone were no longer sufficient to guarantee Yugoslavia's security and might even expose it to the risk of becoming embroiled in serious complications. In this new context, when Mussolini—in the aforementioned Milan speech of November 1, 1936, the very same one, not coincidentally, that had paved the way for the gentlemen's agreement—had stated that in recent times the atmosphere between the two countries had "greatly improved" and had added that "today the necessary and sufficient conditions of a moral, political, and economic nature now exist to place [their] relations on a new foundation of concrete friendship" 144, Stojadinović—by then convinced that England and France were unable to truly guarantee Yugoslavia's security and were not even willing to assist it economically—seized the opportunity: he had dismissed as "opportunistic and platonic" the part of the "Duce's" speech in which Hungary was referred to as the "greatly maimed nation" to which "justice" must be "rendered," and had immediately given instructions to respond to the Italian overture.[145] In this mutual climate of goodwill, negotiations proceeded rapidly, despite the evident discontent and concerns that the prospect of an Italian-Yugoslav agreement had aroused in Paris, Prague, and even London146 (Berlin, on the other hand, had taken a favorable stance, as it was interested in further isolating Czechoslovakia), and had influenced the attitudes of Turkey and Romania in a manner favorable to Italy —the other Danube-Balkan country on which Rome (despite the difficulty of the matter given its relations with Hungary) was most counting to establish its own sphere of influence in the region, one that could serve both an anti-French and anti-German function—and had also facilitated a rapprochement, after years of tension, between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. At first, Ciano had even aimed for an alliance treaty; then, faced with Yugoslavia's refusal to go that far—at least for the time being—the negotiations shifted toward a pact of friendship and mutual cooperation. Not a generic one, however, but one designed to put an end to all major disputes between the two countries—from border disputes (an end to mutual irredentist claims) to those concerning the treatment of Slavic minorities in Italy, to those arising from the presence in Italy of the Ustaše in 1947.

'* For the British position, see O. Carmi, *La Grande-Bretagne et la Petite Entente*, Geneva 1972, pp. 319 ff.; and, more generally, N. Iordache, *La Petite Entente et l'Europe*, Geneva 1977, pp. 289 ff.....

147 Three secret annexes to the treaty referred directly or indirectly to the Ustasha issue. The most important one stipulated that A. Pavelic and the other Ustasha leaders would be interned and barred from any political activity. As for the rank-and-file members, it was provided that a portion of them could be sent to the colonies as laborers. Within three months, the Italian authorities were to provide the Yugoslav authorities with the names and locations of internment, confinement, or residence. Following this agreement, the Yugoslavs were provided with a list of 308 names, some of whom were interned on the Lipari Islands or sent to Libya and Somalia. 202 Ustasha members, contacted by a Yugoslav delegate and who had not taken part in terrorist actions, agreed to return to their homeland. See M. Stojadinović, *Yugoslavia Between the Two Wars*, op. cit., pp. 173 ff.

The agreements in favor of the Slavic minority—to whom various rights were administratively granted —were also kept secret, as Italy did not wish to publicly disavow the policy it had pursued up to that point or to set dangerous precedents that could be invoked by the Germans in South Tyrol. See ibid., pp. 175 ff.

By early March, everything was ready for the signing of the treaty, scheduled for the second half of the month in Belgrade with Ciano's participation. Guadalajara obviously did not jeopardize the formal conclusion of the treaty, which took place as scheduled on March 25. There is no doubt, however, that the defeat of the CTV—which significantly tarnished the aura of power that had surrounded Fascist Italy after the Ethiopian War—considerably diminished the significance of the success achieved by Italian diplomacy. In particular, it made Stojadinovic much more cautious; on the one hand, less willing

to take further steps to distance himself from Paris and the Little Entente and draw closer to Rome, and, on the other hand, more inclined, if anything, to prioritize relations with Germany over those with Italy —a move that seriously undermined Ciano's entire strategy, as he found himself having made a whole series of political and economic concessions while reaping only a fraction of the expected benefits. Moreover, this was on an issue such as relations with Yugoslavia, which was particularly sensitive among the most hardline Fascist circles and regarding which any "concession" provoked negative reactions that could not easily be ignored—especially by someone like Ciano, who was under intense scrutiny. And this was true even though, although some of the results expected from the Yugoslav front had failed to materialize, the Treaty of Belgrade undoubtedly yielded other benefits. As Grandi wrote to Ciano on April 1, its signing in fact helped at least curb the intense anti-Italian tension that had arisen in England immediately after Guadalajara and prompted the British government to intervene to moderate it: even though militarily defeated in Spain, Fascist Italy demonstrated through this treaty that it was still an adversary capable of initiatives that could not be underestimated in any way, given the potential negative and positive implications they might have for Western and British policy in particular.[48]

Mussolini received the first reports on the Battle of Guadalajara

Grandi wrote, among other things: "I understand that at the meeting of the [British] Cabinet on March 24, the Italian-Yugoslav Agreement was the subject of discussion and review, and that, after recognizing that the event could not be viewed as favorable to Great Britain's obvious interests in the Mediterranean, it was nevertheless decided to give it—if only in appearance— a positive and favorable reception, for the following reasons:

1) To conceal the failure of British diplomatic efforts from the British public.

2) To demonstrate to the Duce the British Government's genuine intentions to "demobilize" and restore Italian-British relations to a state of possible normality.

3) Because of the concern that, although the Italian-Yugoslav Agreement must currently be regarded as a weakening of British positions in the Mediterranean, this Agreement might in the future become a line of resistance against German pressure directed toward the Mediterranean itself, and thus, in the long run, indirectly "work" in favor of British interests."

while he was in Libya. At first, he did not overreact to the defeat and focused above all on getting a clear picture of the situation and the causes of the offensive's failure. His telegrams to Ciano '49, who relayed the news to him as it came in, are clear. The first, sent at noon on March 17, read as follows:

From the collection of Colli's telegrams, I have not been able to gain—and do not have—a clear picture of the situation. It is a positive sign that our operation did not achieve its objective and that the battle lacked the "Malaga style." We need to know the extent of our losses in men and equipment. Serious complications arising from our legionnaires' contact with Italian exiles were easily foreseeable and could have been avoided; they must be avoided in the future. As for the incompetent lower-ranking officers, it is necessary to send a contingent of new officers to replace them. The passivity of the Spaniards during the battle is deeply regrettable, as is the passivity of their propaganda organs in the face of the smear campaign orchestrated against Italian troops by European anti-fascists; above all, it is important to know what steps will be taken to regain the initiative in operations, and I await reports on the results of the Franco-Colli meeting—a report that was announced but has not yet been received. Finally, I need to know whether these incompetent subordinates belong to the Militia or to other units.

The second telegram, sent the following day, read:

I have received a telegram containing data on our losses and an account of Colli's meeting with General Franco. I have no grounds to share Franco's optimism regarding the collapse of the Red resistance in Madrid, which has been announced far too many times. Please telegraph Colli to tell him that I approve of the text of his letter addressed to Franco and that he should insist on the following solution, which I consider the best: the withdrawal of our troops to the second line to reorganize them and prepare them for a new offensive.

As for the third telegram, sent on March 19, it essentially reiterated some of the points already made:

If Farinacci is still in Spain, he can be used for the counter-propaganda Colli mentions. It is best to avoid contact among Italians on the front lines.

From these telegrams, it is clear that Mussolini had no intention of withdrawing from Spain at that time. It is more difficult to say whether this was already dictated by a desire to achieve a military victory or whether it depended on information about the situation that was not yet clear. We mention this because, upon his return to Rome, two conflicting states of mind coexisted within the "Duce" for some time, indicating the emergence of an unresolved conflict within him that must be kept in mind if one wishes to understand his personal position and the difficulties in which Fascist politics found itself after Guadalajara.

149 Mussolini, XLH, pp. 181 ff. Colli was General Roatta's cover name.

On the one hand, there was the searing anger and the burning desire to avenge and redeem the defeat in a spectacular manner. This state of mind grew ever stronger as soon as Mussolini had all the information necessary to: a) understand that it was now impossible to bring about, in the short term, the turning point in the military situation that, according to his plans, was supposed to decide the fate of the civil war; b) realize both the vast scale and the ferocity of the anti-fascist and anti-Italian campaign orchestrated in the wake of the CTV's defeat (and the news coming from Ethiopia regarding the repression following the attack on Graziani) by the anti-fascist press in all countries to present Guadalajara as
one of the most "decisive" battles in the history of all time (E. Hemingway, in particular, helped create this image through a series of dispatches from Spain) and as the "Caporetto" of fascism; and—most importantly—to grasp the repercussions it had had in certain circles and newspapers, especially British ones, which had little or nothing to do with militant anti-fascism and which therefore took on a very special significance; c) to assess the consequences this had not only on the prestige of Italy and fascism (on March 22, in the House of Commons, a Labor MP went so far as to state, amid general laughter, that if the Non-Intervention Committee did not quickly find a solution, "the Italian volunteers are rushing so fast on their own that they will have already reached Italy by the time the Committee reaches its conclusions"), but also for its foreign policy programs; d) to make an initial assessment of the domestic repercussions of the defeat, both as it pertained to anti-fascist circles (for whom Guadalajara represented a surge of hope the likes of which they had not experienced in years) and to those sectors of fascism that had viewed the intervention in Spain with disfavor and seized the opportunity to give new life to their criticisms. On the other hand, there was the awareness that Guadalajara—unless the "volunteers" withdrew, which, however, would have constituted a resounding admission of the defeat suffered and endorsed the exaggerations about it spread far and wide by the anti-fascists and, therefore, a severe blow to the domestic and international prestige of Fascism—would greatly delay the "turning point" of the civil war, condemning Italy to an ever-greater commitment in

Spain and making the hoped-for start of a new phase in relations with England highly problematic. And this is without even mentioning the other “secondary” consequences, both domestic and international.

Reaching a decision was certainly not easy, especially for a man like Mussolini, for whom matters of prestige took precedence over everything else. Yet the “Duce” remained uncertain and torn for a long time. Upon his return to Rome on the evening of

22 (many described it as a “hasty” return, though in reality his presence in the capital for the eighteenth anniversary of the founding of the Fasci di combattimento had been planned for some time), the next day, from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia, he took care to project the utmost confidence and to warn the British not to be swept up by the wave of anti-fascism currently underway. “The anniversary of the founding of the Fasci,” he said,[150] “comes at a time when one of the usual storms is raging against our magnificent Fascist Italy; it is a storm of the printed press.”

This flood of murky ink—logically linked to the hysterical and hypocritical rhetoric from certain Anglican pulpits, which are always ready to see the speck in another’s eye while their own is crushed by heavy, centuries-old beams—will not in the least succeed in shaking our imperturbable calm or the no less imperturbable calm of the entire Italian people.

Against the bad faith of others, we oppose our indisputable loyalty; against the castle of others’ lies, the impetuous and overwhelming breath of our truth; against the blind hatred of others, our conscious contempt.

We have been tested by the economic siege, which, after nine months, ended in a surrender: that of the besiegers.

Nevertheless, it must be proclaimed that these so-called campaigns staged by professional pacifists are a prelude to complications and conflicts, thereby proving once again that they are the true and formidable enemies of that peace and European cooperation which we sincerely desire and put into practice through our actions.

It is said that the Italian people are quick to forget. Wrong! Wrong! One of the many errors into which the superficial or uninformed foreign observer often falls. The Italian people, on the contrary, have a tenacious memory and know how to wait. We waited forty years to avenge Adwa, but we succeeded!

And even if one day this were to happen—that memories were to fade—we would be here to reawaken them and prod them.

Black Shirts!

Remember and prepare! This is the warning of today’s celebration.

The next day, he reassured Franco that he could “count on the help of Fascist Italy” 151. An ambiguous phrase that betrays his uncertainty. This is confirmed by the telegram he sent to Grandi on the night of the 25th while Ciano was in Yugoslavia. An awkward and childishly Machiavellian telegram, yet one that demonstrates that, even though he did not know how or was unwilling to make a real decision, he was leaning toward a swift withdrawal of the “volunteers”; in light of this, the phrase “it is clear that I will not give the order to withdraw the volunteers unless there has first been a decisive victory” contained in the other telegram sent the following day to the king[152], to inform him of his trip to Libya,

the situation in Spain, and the signing of the agreements with Yugoslavia, takes on a much more precise meaning than one might be inclined to attribute to it at first glance: not linked to the prospect of a victory that would decide the outcome of the civil war, but to the much more prosaic and "personal" prospect of a CTV victory that would erase the "disgrace" of Guadalajara. In the telegram to Grandi[153], Mussolini first stated that he would no longer send any more men to Spain, "neither masses nor groups"; he then added that he would not, however, withdraw those who were already there "until the failure at Guadalajara—which was more political than military—has been avenged"; but immediately afterward he clarified (while trying to hide behind the Spaniards' attitude: "one of the reasons that leads me to consider this possibility is the attitude of the Spaniards themselves, which was one of spite after Málaga and today is indefinable, but not sympathetic") his true intentions: once revenge had been achieved, he did not rule out "the possibility of a withdrawal of our units if, of course, the others commit to doing the same." This was indeed his long-standing position, but only in appearance, since, moving on to the instructions regarding the stance Grandi was to take at the Non-Intervention Committee, he specified:

Since the issue of the volunteers' withdrawal involves entrusting the examination of the problem to a technical subcommittee, I believe we can accept this proposal in principle, though we may subsequently reject it as inapplicable or delay its implementation until our forces have achieved complete victory—which, according to reports from Spain, could occur in ten or fifteen days.

Perhaps, if the leading figures at the Foreign Office had not been away on Easter vacation at that time —and especially if Grandi (to whom the "Duce" had left the decision regarding the most opportune moment to make his démarche) had not deemed it "advisable to wait for the anti-fascist controversy to die down so as not to risk biased interpretations"— this telegram from Mussolini might have changed many things. What is certain is that, as soon as he returned from Belgrade, Ciano managed to secure Mussolini's authorization to order Grandi to postpone the start of new concrete negotiations for the withdrawal of the volunteers. This does not mean, however, that he had convinced him to persist with the intervention to the very end. What Ciano had to manage to achieve was, in practice, simply to buy time, not to "rush" decisions, to wait and see what the new course of operations would be, and above all to await the "inevitable" and "necessary" revenge. Then a decision would be made... And this, of course, relied—in addition to his Machiavellianism—on his desire not to acknowledge the failure of his own policy, but, on the contrary, to confirm its validity with a resounding victory on the battlefield and by leveraging to the fullest what von Hassel had already told him on March 25 (though, at that time, had not prevented him from ordering Grandi to discuss the withdrawal) and that the Germans—deeply concerned about a possible Italian withdrawal from Spain—had begun to repeat in every possible tone: namely, that the Führer and all circles in Berlin were convinced that he was absolutely determined to secure a complete victory, M. An ambiguous solution, which resolved nothing, continued to drag Italy deeper into the Spanish quicksand and diplomatically tied its hands at a moment that could have been decisive; but which, given his state of mind and the doubts that plagued him, "rationally" must have been the easiest option for Mussolini, especially after Ciano had persuaded him to abandon the course dictated by his "political instinct." And this was true even though, deep down, he must have been dissatisfied with it, "sensing" that it was wrong and agonizing over it. So much so that 1) Ciano himself, a few days after having forced him to revoke the instructions given to Grandi in his absence, had to admit to Cantalupo: "He is very troubled, fears he has made a mistake, and must now decide whether to insist or extricate himself,"55; 2) on April 20, the French chargé d'affaires in Rome, Blondel, believed there were signs of an Italian disengagement from Spain and a search for an agreement with England,[56]; and 3) again on May 3, while discussing the Spanish issue with von Neurath, Mussolini reportedly made no secret of the fact that he was still uncertain and, unable to find a solution, clung to the old hope of a possible rapid turn in the civil war.

The Duce...—as recorded in the minutes of the meeting drafted by Ciano 157—made some observations regarding the slow pace of Franco's operations. It was his intention to continue assisting General Franco until the end of May; then, if nothing new had emerged, to present him with this alternative: either move forward quickly or withdraw the Italian troops...

After another month had passed, and it became clear that the negative consequences of Guadalajara—however serious they might have been in relation to the goal of a decisive "turning point" in the war—were, all things considered, less dramatic than initially feared, and as the wave of anti-fascist sentiment sparked by the defeat had also subsided, Mussolini, on the one hand, regained his confidence and, on the other, once again left the management of foreign policy almost entirely in Ciano's hands. There was no further talk of any real possibility of withdrawal from Spain.[158] "Morally," Mussolini closed the chapter on Guadalajara on August 26, 1937, when the CTV legionnaires entered Santander at the head of the Nationalist forces. Officially, however, he had already closed it on June 17, when *Il popolo d'Italia* published an article of his (anonymous, but so unmistakable that no one had any doubts about its author), titled precisely *Guadalajara*, with a falsely calm and historicizing tone, intended to be the definitive word on the entire affair—its official narrative for Italians and the world. "At most," Guadalajara had been a "failure," "which could not have and did not have any military consequences."

A failure that anti-fascist speculation managed to inflate for a moment, in order to boost the flagging morale of the Bolshevik bands on the Spanish front and on the front of the Third International. Rather than a failure, one must speak of an Italian victory, which events did not allow to be fully exploited.

The Italian troops had fought exceptionally well and considered themselves victorious. If there had been a mistake, it had been made by the command when it gave them the order to retreat. "Of the forty kilometers advanced, twenty remained in the legionnaires' possession." One thing, however, was "as certain as a dogma of faith—our faith: even the dead of Guadalajara will be avenged."159

Despite the revenge at Santander, politically speaking, Guadalajara remained an unresolved issue for Mussolini for a long time to come. While for Ciano—who had consciously sought intervention in Spain and made it the cornerstone of his policy—it soon became a chapter to be forgotten, for him—who had initially opposed intervention and then accepted it partly out of a sense of "duty," and partly because he had been drawn into it by Ciano and the party's extremists—and in any case, always hoping it would be brief, limited, and such as not to compromise his freedom of movement between England and Germany—it remained, almost until the end of the Spanish Civil War, a sort of dark temptation to his "sense of limits" and his political sensibility. A recurring warning to resolve, at any cost, his policy of intervention and to free Italy from the ball-and-chain of Spain—a warning he would never have been able to heed and from which he tried to free himself by attributing in his mind the responsibility for a situation that was, in fact, entirely his own to the preconceived hostility of the French and, above all, the British—but which, nevertheless, too many hints—including those regarding Franco[160] —to the possibility of an Italian withdrawal if the war were not finally decided—demonstrate just how much this must have plagued him. It is not our intention to explain Fascist foreign policy during this period through the lens of Mussolini's psychology. Such an explanation would be doubly flawed, because it certainly had more concrete motivations and because, as has been noted, shortly after Guadalajara the "Duce" once again delegated much of the leadership to Ciano and withdrew into his isolation. That said, we are also convinced that to fully understand the political phase following Guadalajara—a highly significant and dramatic phase that generally does not receive the attention it deserves—it is impossible to ignore the influence that Mussolini's psychology exerted on it, both directly and indirectly, as a factor that those who had to deal with him, both Italians and foreigners, had to take into account.[161]

After Guadalajara, even though he did not escape the Spanish quicksand—but rather, on the one hand, hoping to traverse it more quickly and, on the other, fearing that the setback he had suffered would make Hitler less interested in an agreement with Italy and might push Berlin to strike a deal with London—he sank even deeper into it, coming closer than ever to the brink of a rupture with London,[62] Mussolini felt a very strong desire to extricate himself from the situation and realized full well (certainly better than Ciano[163]) that only by doing so could he truly restart talks with England, avert the danger—far from hypothetical—that London and Berlin might conclude an agreement over his head that would sideline him[164], and thereby restore a real prospect to his

161 D. Grandi's memoirs are a valuable source in this regard, even if they are too inclined to attribute a decisive role to Mussolini's psychology and the influence exerted on it by the Germans to convince the "Duce" of the bad faith of French and, above all, British policy toward Italy.

See Appendix, Document 8 (reproduced from the DDF, Series II, VIII, pp. 99 ff.) a typical example of the importance attributed to Mussolini's psychological and cultural personality—even abroad—in an effort to predict his policies: it is, in fact, an ad hoc study prepared in early 1938 by one of the most knowledgeable French diplomats in Rome, Jean-Paul Garnier.

162 In his memoirs, D. Grandi wrote: "If I were to answer the following question: Which was the most delicate year in Italian-British relations before 1940? I would not hesitate to answer: the year 1937. It was also the most difficult and arduous period for my work as ambassador in London."

163 For Ciano, too, "friendship" with England was to be a cornerstone of Italian foreign policy. "As long as I remain in this position, we will be friends with the British," he told R. Cantalupo in early April (Fu la Spagna, op. cit., p. 261). This awareness, however, was rendered effectively ineffective by his desire to win the war in Spain and by the conviction this generated that he could postpone the agreement with London until he had achieved victory in Spain and could negotiate it himself, so as not to have to share the credit with anyone.

policy toward Germany. And this was not only after June—when Baldwin had stepped down as head of the British government and been replaced by Chamberlain—and increasingly clear signals began arriving from London that even the new prime minister and part of his government were eager—despite Eden's "reservations"—to resume talks with Italy and reach an agreement with it, but they could not do so unless a solution was found to put an end to Italian intervention in Spain. In this regard, what he told Ambassador von Hassel as early as June 12, "in a tone that was often dramatic," is highly significant. The linchpin of future world politics lay in Italy's and Germany's relations with England (the importance of France and the USSR was much less, given that he was convinced the former was heading toward a serious social crisis and the latter was on the eve of major internal upheavals). His most fervent desire was to reach a general agreement with England (recognition of the Empire, settlement of issues concerning the Italian and British colonies, and the Mediterranean), even though it was clear that the mood in London was not yet ripe for it. Sooner or later, however, such an agreement would have to be reached: in a struggle between the British lion and the Italian leopard, the latter might succumb, but the lion would emerge so severely wounded that, in anticipation of this, it would prefer an agreement to a fight. The important thing was that Germany not allow itself to be seduced by the illusions systematically fostered by England to drive a wedge between Berlin and Rome. The Axis had to remain united: there was to be no agreement between Berlin and London without Rome, nor between Rome and London without Berlin.[165]

Reconstructing this tangle of political considerations and often conflicting states of mind on the part of Mussolini and Ciano—this tapestry of realism and ambition, of boldness, fears, and fatalism, of Machiavellian maneuvers both small and large, of deep-rooted convictions, prejudices, and resentments—is essential to truly understanding Italian politics between Guadalajara and the signing of the "Easter Agreements." Only by keeping all these aspects and their interrelationships clearly in mind can one understand why, out of fear that Germany might slip away and, at the same time, in the hope of persuading England to overlook the "Spanish precedent"—as discussed in D. C. Watt, *Historiography of Appeasement*, in *Crisis and Controversy*. Essays in Honor of A. J. Taylor, New York 1976, pp. no sgg.

Clear evidence of the fear that Mussolini and Ciano harbored regarding an Anglo-German agreement concluded over Italy's head—and even merely the possibility that the Anglo-French might consider weakening the Axis—is provided by the disappointment felt in Rome, just a few days later, by the news that von Neurath was preparing to visit London and by the countermeasures immediately put in place to block the German initiative. See ibid., pp. 339 ff., as well as *Europe Toward Catastrophe*, op. cit., pp. 186 ff.

To counter Italy's further rapprochement with Germany, Rome—under pressure from German demands to induce the Austrian government to give "full effect" to the agreement of July 1 of the previous year—on the one hand, through Mussolini's statement on April 22 in Venice, confirmed to Schuschnigg that it did not want the Anschluss; but on the other hand, during those same days, the news (via P. Gentizon, who had met with Ciano) that the Anschluss was inevitable ("in Austria, everything young is Nazi") and had Gayda (known worldwide as the most authoritative spokesperson for Palazzo Chigi) write that the participation of Austrian Nazis in the Vienna government was imminent, 66. It was certainly not possible to save Austria with these petty Machiavellian maneuvers. Both Mussolini and Ciano were equally certain of this. However, it is difficult to say that they had already written Austria off as a lost cause. On January 6, when he had opened the door to Germany and proposed the solution of making Austria a satellite state, Mussolini had done so because he felt the noose tightening around his neck, but in the hope that time would allow him to prevent the Anschluss from passing through the breach he had thus opened. This is demonstrated by Italy's aid and support in 1936 for Austrian rearmament (suspended only when it became clear that continuing it would lead to an untenable situation with Berlin) and by the warning that the "Duce" personally sent to Vienna a month after the Austro-German agreement of July 11: "You have twenty months to bring your army up to twenty divisions and thus be able to 'play politics'."[167] Even though they feared the possibility that Germany might slip away from them and strike a deal with England over Italy's head, neither Mussolini nor Ciano had given up hope of saving Austria, even though the former, anticipating the worst, was beginning to prepare an alibi for himself so that he could (as in the case of Spain) eventually shift the blame for the Anschluss onto the Austrians—and in particular onto their "lack of sympathy" and trust toward Italy.[168] Ultimately, they believed, everything would depend on how Italian-British relations played out. In the meantime, Austria could serve as bait, but the important thing was that the German "pike" not devour it. The irritated shake of the head with which Mussolini, a few days after his meeting in Venice with Schuschnigg, responded to Göring's assertion that the Anschluss was inevitable[169] is telling. But even more so is the final "Machiavellian" attempt conceived by Ciano after the meeting that he and the "Duce" had in Rome on November 6, 1937, with von Ribbentrop,[170] during which Austria's fate had seemed to them practically sealed and set to unfold in the near future: that of suggesting to the Austrian government that it "tie Hitler's hands".... by joining the Anti-Comintern Pact[171]; and the fact that the famous "Hossbach Memorandum" shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that in November 1937 (that is, after Mussolini's visit to Germany and in the wake of the Rome talks with von Ribbentrop just mentioned), even Hitler considered it impossible to predict what Italy's stance would be (especially if

Mussolini were no longer alive) at the time of the Anschluss172. So much so that, in his plans, the Spanish Civil War was supposed to last as long as possible: a swift and total victory for Franco was not what he desired, both to keep tensions in the Mediterranean high for as long as possible (and avoid an Italian-British agreement) and in the event that the civil war turned into an Anglo-French-Italian conflict, which would have allowed him to resolve the Czech and Austrian questions173.

166 See *L'Europa verso la catastrofe*, op. cit., pp. 165 ff.; K. Schuschnigg, *Un requiem in rosso-bianco-rosso*, Milan 1947, pp. 279 ff.; DDF, s. Il, V, pp. 563 ff.; "Il giornale d'Italia," April 23, 1937; as well as, more generally, J. Gehl, *Austria, Germany, and the Anschluss 1931–1938*, London 1963, pp. 133 ff.

As can be seen, the discussion always returns to Spain. From this perspective, Mussolini's visit to Germany from September 25 to 29, 1937—however important it may have been—takes on less significance than is generally attributed to it. It was highly significant in terms of the image of unity and power that the "Duce" brought back from Germany, and for the psychological impact that certain words he spoke in Berlin, at the May Field, regarding the "solidarity" that was to animate relations between the two revolutions and the two peoples, would have on his "sense of honor" in the years that followed,[174] it was politically less significant than has often been believed. Upon his return to Italy on October 4, Mussolini sent a very brief initial report on his visit from Forlì to Victor Emmanuel III, which we can consider to be

17J See ibid., pp. 36 ff. The "Hossbach Memorandum" clearly shows that, in the hoped-for event of an Anglo-French-Italian conflict, Hitler would have remained neutral, limiting himself to supplying Italy with raw materials. This explains why, at the end of 1937, he was not at all seeking a military alliance with Italy, which would only become important to him after the "Easter Agreements," when the possibility of a conflict in the Mediterranean was no longer on the table and the prospect of greater political vacillation on the part of Italy—or even a further rapprochement between Italy and Britain—began to take shape.

All of this is reliable and serves as the best testimony to the value he placed on it:[175]

... my trip to Munich and Berlin had the demonstrative character that was intended. The only political discussion took place at the Führer's private residence in Munich, during which the Führer confirmed to me that he would continue to assist Spain by sending supplies. Göring, on the other hand, spoke to me about Austria to assure me that no move would be made in that direction without prior agreement with Italy. My impression is that Reich has not given up on the Anschluss; he is merely waiting for events to come to a head. Military preparations are proceeding at a very rapid pace, but as things stand, we have little or nothing to learn. Even in that same Berlin military journal, there was no shortage of the inconsistencies and mishaps typical of all such publications. I noticed in all of them an attitude of antipathy toward England. The German people were very friendly.

Talk of a trip by Mussolini to Germany (according to protocol, it was the "Duce" who was supposed to return the visit Hitler had made to Italy in 1934) had been circulating for some time. Initially, it was the Germans who had wanted it, interested in binding Italy more closely to them. On January 23, Göring had discussed the matter personally with Mussolini, telling him that "the Führer would be extraordinarily pleased if the Duce were to pay a visit to Germany." Mussolini replied that he, too, wished to see Hitler again, but did not go beyond a very general statement: a visit to Germany was "within the realm of possibility"176. In the following months, the Germans periodically pressed the

issue, both directly and indirectly, but Rome did not follow up on it. Mussolini made the preliminary decision to travel to Germany—probably in the fall—and communicated it to Marshal von Blomberg only in early June, during the naval review organized in honor of the guest in the Gulf of Naples;[177] the final decision was made in early August; the official announcement was made on September 3. The sequence of these dates is significant. The second half of March, April, and May (as well as much of June) had been dark months in Italian-British relations. The campaign waged by the British and French press against Italy over the events in Spain and Addis Ababa and the assassination of the Rosselli brothers—and the counter-campaign launched by the Italian press to counter it—had reached unprecedented heights, so much so that on May 8, Rome, partly in retaliation and partly to prevent certain news from circulating, banned all British newspapers from entering Italy with the exception of the *Daily Mail*, the *Evening News*, and the *Observer*, and recalled Italian journalists from London; and on June 25, Farinacci {"Sever Relations") wrote in "Il regime fascista" went so far as to write that, given the circumstances, it would be better for Italy to go to war with England and France immediately—given the former's military weakness and the latter's internal turmoil—rather than wait until it would be more advantageous for them178. During that same period, however, a notable thaw had set in in relations between Germany and England, so much so that in mid-June von Neurath had considered traveling to London on an official visit, accepting a British invitation to that effect. In these circumstances, Rome had every interest in pressing Berlin closely and in leading London to believe that everything between Italy and Germany was going smoothly and that, indeed, thanks in part to British hostility, the Axis was making progress. Hence, first, Ciano's speech in Parliament on May 13, which, while leaving the door open to England, emphasized the "parallelism of policies between Italy and Germany" and the continued strengthening of the "fruitful collaboration" between the two countries,[179] followed by Mussolini's announcement to von Blomberg that he accepted Hitler's invitation, though he did not act on it immediately. As the situation with Britain improved in the second half of June (on July 21, the measures prohibiting the import of British newspapers were revoked) and contacts began between Rome and London to review relations between the two countries, one might think that Mussolini's trip to Germany would lose its appeal. In reality, this was not the case. First, because—in anticipation of a positive development in relations with the British—the "Duce" had every reason not to alarm Hitler too much; and second, because, as was his custom, he wanted to negotiate with London from the strongest possible position and was therefore interested in leveraging his "excellent" relations with Berlin to the fullest extent in the negotiations. A typical example of this is the speech he delivered on August 20 in PalermoIM. Firm, yet in substance extremely conciliatory toward England:

When I reflect on the last two years of our relations with London, I am led to conclude that, at the core, there has been a great misunderstanding: public opinion had lagged behind; people had a superficial and picturesque conception of Italy—the kind of picturesqueness that I detest. They did not yet know this young, resolute, and very strong Italy. Now, with the January agreements, there was a clarification

178 Farinacci's article was disavowed by Ciano in discussions with both the British and German ambassadors. The following month, Farinacci launched another fierce journalistic attack ("Ideal Principles or Pounds?", in *Il regime fascista*, July 8, 1937), attributing "the decapitation of the Falangist movement"—carried out by Franco—and rumors of a possible monarchical restoration to England's machinations to establish its own "protectorate" over Spain.

of the situation; then some regrettable incidents occurred, which it is pointless to revisit at this time. Today, there is once again a glimmer of hope on the horizon. Considering the community of colonial frontiers, I believe that a lasting and definitive reconciliation between the path and life can be achieved.

Thus, Italy is prepared to cooperate on all issues affecting European political life.

And, at the same time, this is reassuring toward Germany and, therefore, indirectly a means of exerting pressure on London:

one cannot reach Rome by ignoring Berlin or going against Berlin, nor can one reach Berlin by ignoring Rome or going against Rome. There is a solidarity in action between the two regimes: you understand me when I say that there is a solidarity in action. Let it be stated in the most categorical terms that we will not tolerate Bolshevism or anything similar in the Mediterranean.

Second, because, after the initial encouraging exchanges, the Anglo-Italian rapprochement had come to an abrupt halt as a result of the extremely grave situation that had arisen in the Mediterranean following several torpedo attacks on Spanish Republican and neutral ships by “mysterious” submarines that everything suggested were Italian. As we shall see shortly, this was creating a situation that was not only entirely new but also seemed to threaten to reach the point of a complete breakdown. Hence, in August—when Mussolini’s visit was intended to put pressure on London and reassure Berlin—preparations for it began. Then, on September 3, when the international landscape was by then changing completely and the outlook for Rome was growing increasingly bleak, his official announcement came—as a sort of “hold your fire” toward England and France and—as usual—also a “I’m with you” toward Germany, which was anything but inclined to get involved in Italy’s adventurous operations in support of Franco. Except that in the end—having realized they had pushed things too far and could not rely on Germany in the event of a crisis, and having come to the conclusion that they should try to defuse tensions with London and Paris (in simple terms, having decided to forgo the use of submarines to block supplies to the “Reds”) - to restore to the visit to Germany that essentially “demonstrative” character that Mussolini and Ciano had intended to give it in early August, when they had actually begun preparing for it, and which—as the “Duce” telegraphed to the king—it indeed had. This “demonstrative character” proves, on the one hand, the extent to which Mussolini’s policy toward Germany was instrumental compared to his policy toward England and, on the other hand, the decisive influence that his policy in Spain exerted on the former. This influence was something Mussolini was aware of but could not shake off, and it had a decisive impact on his entire political strategy, ultimately leading first to its virtual paralysis and then to its failure.

Although incapable of making a real decision, in the first months after Guadalajara Mussolini acted in Spain with a certain degree of caution. During the spring operations, the CTV was kept almost entirely in reserve.[181] The same occurred in the summer, with the sole exception of its substantial participation in the offensive on Santander (after which it was again withdrawn from the front lines and, until the spring of ’38, took part in very few operations). During this period, the main focus was on its reorganization.[182] Aside from 72 fighter aircraft, intended to ensure air superiority for the Nationalists, shipments of supplies and reinforcements were also very limited: by the end of August, only 1,500 men had arrived in Spain.[18]\

This relative caution can be explained only in part by the need to reorganize the CTV. It is not difficult to imagine that Mussolini’s indecision and his and Ciano’s desire not to further strain the already severely shaken relations with England—and, indeed, to try to improve them—also contributed to this. This was all the more true after—once Chamberlain had taken the helm of the British government—the first signs began to emerge of a possible shift in London’s stance, confirming Grandi’s predictions from March–April 184 that a tendency was taking shape among a faction of the Conservatives to seek an agreement with Italy (predictions that had helped persuade Grandi not to act immediately on Mussolini’s telegram of March 25, so as not to weaken Italy’s bargaining power prematurely). He is justified in thinking this by the fact that, as soon as the British ambassador in Rome, Drummond, made

a first cautious exploratory approach to Ciano on June 19, Ciano hastened to send Grandi a report of the conversation, accompanying it with a letter that is of the utmost interest to us, since it demonstrates, on the one hand, how much —despite the naively cold and detached tone he employed—Ciano and Mussolini (the reference to “higher directives” is clear) were deeply committed to an agreement with England and, in order to achieve it, were willing to settle for very little; and, on the other hand, just how much Ciano underestimated the Spanish obstacle185:

181 At the same time, precise instructions were issued to prevent Italian units from coming into direct contact with units of the International Brigades that included Italians.

182 Against this backdrop, Roatta was replaced by Gen. Bastico, who was in turn replaced by Gen. Berti.

Dear Grandi,

I have sent you the account of my conversation with Drummond. Although he prefaced his remarks by stating that he was speaking in a purely personal capacity, it seems to me that the tone of his conversation was such as to make it easy to recognize an official rebuke. On the other hand, his words do not differ greatly from those that Eden recently had occasion to say to you.

From my reply to Drummond, you will easily be able to discern what the higher directives are. As things stand, a rapprochement with England not only appears possible but also desirable. However, it must be a complete rapprochement and a comprehensive clarification that leaves no areas of ambiguity or uncertainty. When we concluded the gentlemen’s agreement, both sides believed that we could be flexible on certain points, in the hope that time alone would smooth out those rough edges that we could not smooth out ourselves at the time. Instead, as events have shown, it was precisely in those gray areas that complications arose.

This serves as a lesson for the future. If we wish to—and are able to—achieve clarification, it must be comprehensive. First and foremost, recognition of the empire: legal recognition without a shadow of ambiguity or controversy, which gives both us and the indigenous peoples of the Empire the certainty that England has no intention of ever revisiting the past. Once that is done, I believe we will have little else to add. It is true that the Spanish problem exists, but it seems to me that by now the British must have convinced themselves that we harbor no ambitions whatsoever toward the Iberian Peninsula and that, in the final analysis, the struggle we have waged and are victoriously waging in Spain serves not only our cause but also that of England itself, which can have no desire to see a Bolshevik regime established in Spain or anywhere else.

Being on the ground, you certainly have a perfect understanding of the people and the prevailing sentiments. It is therefore not my place to offer you suggestions or advice. But if you believe the time has come—without, however, doing anything rash or hasty—to make it clear to the British that, for our part, we are ready, under certain fair conditions, to accept the hand they are extending to us, you may certainly do so.

A good opportunity might be when you leave for your short vacation. Before you leave, you could try to meet with Chamberlain, tell him what I myself told Drummond and what I briefly mentioned to you above, and finally ask him if he would like you to bring a message from the new Head of Government to the Duce when you come to Rome. This step on your part could serve to break the ice. And it is my impression that once the ice is broken, things may proceed with relative ease.

As for Neurath's visit, I have nothing in particular to report to you. We are in agreement on every point, and he, too, will seek to contribute to the rapprochement between Rome and London, which, as you well know, we do not seek with the slightest eagerness, but which, on the other hand, we do not intend to dogmatically reject.

At this point, before proceeding further in our discussion, it is necessary to make a brief digression. A few days before

Drummond's initiative in Rome, Lloyd's initiative regarding Cerniti followed a few days later in Paris, about which Ciano informed Grandi on July 8 (ibid.).

the events we are discussing, on June 9, 1937, in Bagnoles-sur-l'Orne, France, Carlo and Nello (who had gone to visit his brother) Rosselli were killed by a group of cagoulards who had attempted to disguise the crime in order to attribute it to internal conflicts within the anti-fascist movement (a theory later espoused by the fascist press as well). There is very little to say about the origin of the crime. The documentation available today proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that the crime was committed on the orders of the SIM and that the killing of Carlo Rosselli had been planned since at least February, as part of an operation aimed at eliminating various "inconvenient individuals"—namely, active anti-fascist figures committed to supporting Republican Spain and denouncing the Italian intervention against it. While the investigations and criminal proceedings conducted in France against the perpetrators of the crime and their French leaders never officially addressed the issue of foreign instigators,[86] the evidence that emerged during those carried out in Italy after the fall of fascism leaves no room for doubt, even if, in the end, the series of

18.6 In fact, as early as March 1938, the French authorities were convinced that Italy was implicated in the crime. Proof of this is the fact that the chief of staff to the Minister of the Interior in the second Blum government secretly informed Manlio Morgagni—who was in Paris at the time—on the 26th of that same month, and Morgagni immediately reported this to Rome in the following terms: "During the night of the 25th, Mr. D. called me on the phone to tell me that he had a very urgent matter to discuss with me and that he would come to see me at my hotel that morning.

"Indeed, he was at my hotel by 9 a.m.

"He prefaced his remarks by saying that his visit was purely personal. Having learned of matters that could jeopardize any mutual goodwill, he was eager to share them with me so that I, in turn, could pass them on to whomever I deemed appropriate.

"The French authorities had learned the names of those who had killed the Rosselli brothers, as well as the perpetrators of other high-profile political crimes.

"Italy appeared to be seriously implicated in them.

"Having told me this, he added that all of this could lead to a serious scandal which, if it broke out, would certainly make any subsequent attempt at reconciliation less likely.

"He also informed me that during the night he had learned that the suspects were in Italy, namely: 'Filhol and Doulet in Sanremo, and Corn in Milan.'

“He thus presented me with this dilemma: either turn the aforementioned individuals away at the border, or detain them, or let them escape. He would have preferred to learn that they were in Switzerland, Spain, or elsewhere. Since they were in Italy, he considered the matter extremely serious and, therefore, a cause for scandal; with this step of his, he intended to try to prevent it.

“He expressed to me his hope that this act of friendship would be appreciated at its true value, and if he informed me of this with such urgency, it is because he believes that whatever the decision in Italy may be, action must be taken immediately.

“At the end of his remarks, I expressed my surprise that he had turned to me regarding a matter of this nature, but that, in any case, I would raise the issue with my country’s representative in Paris.

“And so I did, going to our Chargé d’Affaires at the Embassy in Paris and limiting my report to what I had learned” (acs, Agenzia Stefani, b. 1, n. 68).

Such an attitude is easily understandable when one considers that it was just a few days before the Anschluss, and that many in France hoped that Hitler’s occupation of Austria might prompt Mussolini to move closer to France. Morgagni’s same interlocutor had been explicit in a conversation the previous day (ibid., no. 76): “If Italy draws closer to France, Germany will no longer be able to wage war. But if this rapprochement proves unfeasible, what will Italy do with a Germany that cares about nothing and a hostile France?

“The answer is not difficult.

“Italy will have to come to an agreement with England; it has no choice. Consequently, it will withdraw from the trials, which concluded with a general acquittal. As G. Salvemini wrote—who, more than anyone else, has thoroughly examined the events surrounding the crime and the trials it gave rise to,[87] —it is certain that “the crime was committed by the French cagoulards on orders received from an officer of the Italian SIM, Navale; that he received the orders from his superior in the SIM, Emanuele; and that Emanuele certainly received them from Galeazzo Ciano,”[88]. Historically, the matter could be considered closed at this point. In the context of Mussolini’s biography, however, it is impossible not to wonder what role the “Duce” played in the crime. According to Salvemini,[189] “it is very difficult, if not impossible,” to believe that Ciano acted on his own initiative “and not to carry out Mussolini’s will.” Salvemini is probably right. A doubt remains, however. Is it possible that Mussolini—who, above all, knew full well from his experience following the Matteotti murder the risks inherent in this sort of thing—could have believed that the assassination of a man as prominent as Carlo Rosselli would not have damaged his image abroad and his political standing?

from Spain, also because, as the Spaniards themselves have told us, “if you do not leave voluntarily, they will see to it that you are driven out.”

“But for us French, the threatening gravity of the problem lies elsewhere. As long as you Italians remain in Málaga and Zaragoza, we French will stand firm. But if you continue to advance and reach our borders in the Pyrenees, then the situation will change radically. Then you would have all of France against you. Not the France of the Popular Front, but France with its entire people united in a single resolve. France would rally and rise as one. We do not want a third frontier to defend; that much is certain.

“If you were to approach the Pyrenees, and if that were to lead to war, we would fight it, precisely

because we want to rid ourselves of the nightmare of a third frontier.

“War, I believe, is far off, but it is certain and inevitable in this specific case. We could not stand idly by and watch, as if none of this concerned us.

“So, here is a widespread desire or hope in the current delicate situation: “Italy has nothing to gain in Spain. If Italy were to make a gesture of not approaching our borders in Catalonia, such an act would earn it the gratitude not only of France but of the world. It would be a gesture of great peacemaking significance, and Italy would have everything to gain by making it...

“Contrary to what you believe, no French government will ever be more willing to make peace with Italy than the Popular Front government.

“Because if, in the near future, a National Union government comes to power, it will be far more demanding in its demands. And it’s easy to see why.

“Chamberlain wants to make peace with you because he absolutely needs it for his government’s policy and for his country’s interests. We French stand to gain more from this than anyone else.

“By reaching an agreement with you, England places us in a position of assured peace of mind. We know more or less what the terms of the agreement are. England will never allow a situation that could potentially harm us. It protects us from any reckless moves on your part. You, even if you wanted to, can no longer do anything against us.

“A French government of national unity will take advantage of this de facto situation and will use it in any future negotiations, discussing your proposals while giving even greater consideration to its own.

“The Popular Front government would accept them immediately, as soon as they were presented.”

In this situation, it was only logical that the French would be careful not to reveal what they had ascertained regarding Italy’s direct responsibility in the killing of the Rosselli brothers.

And, above all, even though he was convinced that “political reasons” outweighed everything else, could he at that moment risk provoking an outcry against him that might block or at least delay the much-desired resumption of talks with London? This was all the more true given the positive signals that, as has been noted, had been coming in this regard as early as March–April; and, as if that were not enough, he must have been aware of the rumors—dating back to the time of the 1890 African War—that Rosselli was in contact with Eden, the very man whom he, not without reason, considered the greatest obstacle to a rapprochement with London. While we are aware that the problem will almost certainly never be resolved, one must wonder whether the entire “Operation Unwanted Persons”—and, therefore, the assassination of the Rossellis—was not conceived—as Colonel Emanuele191 has always maintained—without Mussolini’s knowledge, as a personal initiative of Ciano’s, and whether Ciano, in his recklessness, had ceased to follow its developments and, therefore, was no longer able to stop it. This is, in fact, the explanation that Mussolini himself seemed to hint at when speaking with Y. de Begnac*92 in July 1937:

even the Rosselli tragedy will become a matter of state. Two more deaths on our watch. History will decide the reason for their fate. Power does not always manage to control the actions of the apparatus that represents it.

With this—let us be clear—we do not intend to exonerate Mussolini, who, in any case, certainly bore responsibility for this and other crimes of fascism—a responsibility stemming from having created, and allowed to be created, the moral climate in which such things could occur, and from having surrounded himself with men capable of conceiving them and carrying them out. Nor do we mean to suggest that he was incapable of conceiving and ordering them personally; the order he issued in February 1939 to execute all Italians who had fought alongside the "Reds" and had been taken prisoner in Spain ("the dead do not tell the story")[193] speaks for itself. The reason for our question is quite different: to try to shed as much light as possible on Mussolini's political attitude, modus operandi, and psychology at this moment. It is, in fact, evident that if it could be established with certainty that the "Duce" was aware of what was being organized against Rosselli and did not prevent it, one would have to conclude that his realism was by then either greatly weakened (to the point of not making him consider the consequences) or extremely strong (to the point of making him certain that there would be no serious repercussions at the level of "grand politics"): two conclusions which, however, in light of his overall political behavior during this period, neither one nor the other seems acceptable to us. That said, let us close this digression and return to Anglo-Italian relations and the influence of events in Spain on them.

Along these lines, indirect confirmation that Mussolini was unaware of "initiatives" of this sort can perhaps be found in an entry in G. Ciano's Diary (p. 37) dated September 16, 1937 (when Mussolini must have been on high alert by then) and which refers to the bombings carried out five days earlier by the Cagoulards against two headquarters of French industrial organizations: "The Duce is concerned that the French police are on the trail of the perpetrators of the attacks in Paris. And [Emanoele] tells me that's impossible. In any case, we have nothing to do with it. Are they Frenchmen in the service of Metfenier?]"

193 See G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 256. For his part, Ciano had already issued orders to this effect as early as February 1937: "It is understood that while the Spanish prisoners must be treated with respect, the international mercenaries must be summarily executed. Naturally, the Italian renegades must be the first." See G. B. Guerri, *Galeazzo Ciano*, op. cit., p. 247.

At the Italian Embassy in London, Ciano's letter of June 20 was welcomed as "the icing on the cake." From the moment the Ethiopian conflict had ended, Grandi had been personally committed to rebuilding Italian-British friendship. Already the previous year, he had played a significant role in preparing the gentlemen's agreement, even though Ciano had subsequently insisted on negotiating it personally in Rome, effectively cutting the London embassy out of the talks. Once Chamberlain became prime minister, Grandi had already made his first moves, convinced that the opportune moment had finally arrived. Now, following Ciano's letter, he threw himself headlong into the operation, ready—if necessary—to use every means at his disposal, even to make Chamberlain and Mussolini say more than they were willing to say, in order to create between them that "trust" which alone could allow the negotiations they both wanted to begin—negotiations that, given their mutual distrust, they both feared might fail, with serious consequences for their prestige and their political standing. Looking back in his diary'94 on the various stages of the affair after the conclusion of the "Easter Agreements," Grandi recounted the behind-the-scenes events leading up to the start of the negotiations as follows:

Ever since June—that is, since Chamberlain's arrival at Downing Street—I had believed that he was the only man with whom we could reach an understanding.

I “felt” that I absolutely had to do everything possible to foster a psychological understanding between the Duce and Chamberlain. I was certain that if I succeeded in creating a sense of sympathy and mutual respect for each other’s good faith between Mussolini and Chamberlain, perhaps we could reach a definitive resolution between us and England.

I began working toward this goal in June. I felt there was only one avenue through which to outmaneuver Eden. Eden was fixated on proving Mussolini’s bad faith. It was necessary to thwart Eden’s plan by trying to demonstrate Mussolini’s good faith to Chamberlain.

This was the guiding principle of all my “personal” efforts from June through February of this year. However, instilling in Chamberlain a sense of esteem and trust for Mussolini was not enough. Something even more difficult was required: instilling in Mussolini a sense of esteem and trust for Chamberlain. This was even more difficult. Yet I succeeded. How?

I sought to “bring together” these two men personally, even from a distance, and despite their mental distance.

In my reports to Rome, I painted a far more optimistic picture of Chamberlain than he actually was, portraying him as a friend of Italy and an admirer of the Duce—much more of a “friend” and “admirer” than Chamberlain actually was. I myself “invented” a message from Chamberlain to the Duce in June 1937, during the coronation period—that is, during one of the most delicate and difficult moments in Italian-British relations. In truth, Chamberlain never entrusted me with a message for the Duce. This is how things unfolded. During the luncheon at the Foreign Office to celebrate King George VI’s birthday, Eden introduced all the ambassadors to the new Prime Minister (who had been appointed just a few days earlier following the coronation ceremonies). Chamberlain spoke with each of us for a few minutes, exchanging polite remarks with everyone. He spoke kindly to me, but without any specific political meaning. Nevertheless, this was enough for me to send a report to Rome in which I deliberately “exaggerated” the nature of these innocuous words from Chamberlain and their appearance of deference toward the Duce—an aspect that Chamberlain never even dreamed of conveying...

Having begun to break down Rome’s mistrust—thereby making Mussolini and Ciano more willing to heed various signals that had meanwhile begun to arrive from the British side as well—and having received the green light from Ciano, Grandi intensified his efforts to the utmost, now focusing entirely on Chamberlain and even more so on his party entourage, whom he knew were even more committed than the prime minister himself to the prospect of an agreement with Rome. Within a couple of weeks, these efforts bore their first fruit. On July 12, Grandi was able to write to Ciano that Adrian Dingli, a Maltese national who served as legal counsel to the embassy and was also a trusted aide to Joseph Ball —a close friend of Chamberlain, head of the government’s Propaganda Organization, and political advisor to the Conservative Party—would arrive in Rome in the days immediately following. Dingli, whose “absolutely unofficial” mission the Prime Minister was aware of, wished to meet with Ciano to assess the actual prospects for a general détente in relations between the two countries and to sound out his position on certain specific points.[195] On July 16 and 17, Dingli

195 See Document 9 in the Appendix, the letter dated July 12, 1937 (D. Grandi Archive, b. 40, file 93, subfile 2, ins. 3). Also preserved in the D. Grandi Archive (b. 66, file 158, subfiles 1 and 2) is an extensive correspondence (June 29, 1937 – June 13, 1940) concerning Dingli’s activities, as well as the diary (July 1, 1937 – May 10, 1940) kept by Dingli himself regarding his role as a secret intermediary.
He had two meetings with Ciano, about which he drafted a detailed report[196] that, as soon as he returned to London, he handed over to Ball, who in turn passed it on to Chamberlain. Chamberlain

must have been fully satisfied with it, since a few days later—effectively bypassing the Foreign Office (which was far from convinced of Mussolini's good faith and was particularly alarmed at that time by reports of an impending reinforcement of Italian garrisons in Libya[197]), accepted a request for a meeting from Grandi, conveyed to him on July 21 via Eden.

The meeting between the two took place on the morning of the 27th at Downing Street. Grandi was extremely skillful, even Mephistophelean. Repeating a "little trick" he had already attempted on the 21st with Eden (on whom, however, it had had no effect), he concocted a "message" from Mussolini for Chamberlain, explaining its contents to him and commenting on them as he went along, but obviously without handing it to him. He then moved on to the political dispute dividing the two countries. Finally, seeing that Chamberlain was at last convinced of Mussolini's willingness to reach an agreement, he "extracted" from him (Chamberlain would say he "encouraged" him to write) that letter to the "Duce"—which Grandi needed to satisfy Mussolini's vanity and persuade him to overcome his final hesitations and embark on the path of negotiations."[8] This time, it was a real letter, unlike Mussolini's nonexistent "message" ("It was I who asked Chamberlain to write to Mussolini explaining how he was responding to the message, which, in truth, was imaginary, because the Duce had never entrusted me with a message of this kind"[199]), in which the prime minister wrote:

Dear Mr. Mussolini, I had a long conversation this morning with Count Grandi, who brought me the message that you were kind enough to send me. No doubt he will relay to you what I told him, but I wish to send you a personal note, and Count Grandi encouraged me to write.

Although I have spent some of my happiest vacations in Italy, it has now been several years since I visited your country, and that is why, to my great regret, I have never had the opportunity to meet Your Excellency. But I have often heard my brother, Sir Austen, speak of you, and always with the highest esteem. He used to say that you were "an excellent person to deal with."

Since becoming Prime Minister, I have been distressed to see the rift between Chamberlain-Ball Grandi and Rome. On this matter, see R. Quartararo, *England and Italy*. From the Easter Pact in Munich (with an appendix on the Italian-British "secret channel"), in *Storia contemporanea*, October–December 1976, pp. 648 ff.

Relations between Italy and Great Britain are still far from that old spirit of mutual trust and affection that lasted for so many years. Despite the bitterness caused by the Abyssinian affair, I believe it is possible to restore those old feelings if we can only dispel the misunderstandings and unfounded suspicions that cloud our mutual trust.

I therefore wholeheartedly welcome the message you have sent me and wish to assure you that this government is motivated solely by the friendliest sentiments toward Italy and will be ready at any moment to open talks with the aim of clarifying the entire situation and removing all causes of suspicion and misunderstanding.

Four days later, on July 31, Mussolini replied to Chamberlain with a most cordial letter in which he stated that he shared Chamberlain's assessment and his hope that it would be "possible to restore relations between our two countries to a basis of cordial and fruitful cooperation":

The interests of Italy and Great Britain are not in conflict, neither in the Mediterranean nor elsewhere. On the contrary, through their peaceful coexistence, they can serve as a further impetus for the development of our relations.

If, as Your Excellency notes, the atmosphere in some areas is still clouded by unfounded suspicions and misunderstandings, a complete and frank clarification of our respective intentions will certainly serve to reestablish the mutual trust upon which every vital international understanding must be based.

To this end, I am pleased to accept the idea put forward by Your Excellency to initiate talks during which, in a spirit of sincere cooperation, we will examine those issues that await resolution in order to return to the desired Italian-British understanding.

In his memoirs, written in Portugal in 1944, Grandi would describe this letter as warm, written in a sincere tone, and clearly penned by Mussolini himself. Mussolini's style was unmistakable. Mussolini declared himself willing to go along with the Prime Minister's proposal. The ice had been broken. A relationship of personal trust had been established between the two men. These were nothing more than mutual declarations of general goodwill, but they already seemed—and were—a great deal. News of this exchange of letters was released to the press. It led to an immediate thaw in relations between the two countries, demonstrating just how artificial and unrealistic the state of relations between Rome and London had been. It also showed that the state of relations between Rome and Berlin was still far from being settled.

Yet if one reads the pages of Grandi's own diary written in the months following the exchange of letters, one finds a statement that stands in stark contrast to these words and leaves one stunned: in the weeks following July 31, Mussolini reportedly hoped "to drag Germany into war against England" 2. How can two such conflicting assessments be explained? Let us try to understand.

Apparently, by the end of July, the path toward the much-hoped-for general agreement was open. In reality, however, it was still in limbo. And not because Mussolini and Ciano himself did not want it. Standing in its way were two obstacles that Grandi had not foreseen. One was the situation in Spain—the eternal Spanish quicksand in which Mussolini, with his inability to draw a clear line under Italian intervention, was about to sink even deeper, aided and abetted by the Germans, who, if there was one thing they did not want, it was for the Anglo-Italian agreement to close the doors to Austria and Czechoslovakia in their faces. The other—probably more unconsciously than consciously—was Ciano, who, instead of urging Mussolini to strike while the iron was hot, preferred to postpone the start of negotiations until late September and did nothing to pave the way for them. It is not easy to say with certainty why. However, some hypotheses can be put forward. First of all, one that is personal, petty, but not to be underestimated: just as he had done the previous year, Ciano wanted to take the management of the negotiations away from Grandi, so that he could then claim all the credit for himself.[201] On the other hand, Ciano wanted to make the British "wait in the wings," to "make them understand" that Fascist Italy was in no hurry. On yet another front, although he had always sought an agreement, he likely had no precise ideas about its actual content: hence his desire to prepare for it calmly and—believing it was now within reach—to figure out how to make it "yield" more. And, finally, there must have been a desire, on the one hand, to lay the groundwork in some way with the Germans—especially now that Mussolini had let slip to von Blomberg that he would be making a trip "probably in the fall" to Germany—and, on the other hand, to use the further "strengthening" of the Axis that the trip would have signaled to exert pressure on the negotiations with London. 202. In sending Grandi Mussolini's letter to Chamberlain, Ciano wrote as follows:

201 The news that Chamberlain had written to Mussolini had made an enormous impression in Italy. A note to the "Duce" from Starace dated July 31 reported: "The news of the personal, handwritten letter addressed to the Duce by Chamberlain has made a profound impression, naturally a favorable one.

“Comments such as the following are common: ‘The Duce has won once again,’ ‘The Duce has once again brought England to its knees,’ ‘The Duce is leading England by the nose.’

“The news of the handwritten letter addressed to the Duce by the King of Belgium, accompanying Van Zeland’s proposal, has also elicited favorable comments.

“It is the general conviction that, as far as Europe is concerned, the reins of power are effectively in the Duce’s hands” (ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence [1922–1943], 242IR, file “Starace A.,” subfile 1).

202 On the same day that Mussolini wrote to Chamberlain, Ciano received Japanese Ambassador Hotta, who conveyed to him an offer of “an anti-communist agreement, similar to the one reached in the past between Tokyo and Berlin” and a secret agreement “on technical cooperation in the military field.” On August 2, Ciano smugly informed Grandi, asking for his opinion on the impact this might have on the Italian-British negotiations, but making no secret of his personal point of view: “The agreement with Japan vastly increases our strength, and as you have always maintained—and as the facts have confirmed—nothing makes people more malleable than strength

The Duce believes that the talks should take place in Rome. This is certainly right and convenient. Timeframe: from the second half of August onward.

Military maneuvers are now—or at least will soon—take place. Rome, in effect, is moving to Sicily. It would be best to wait until their return. On the other hand, a public agreement with the British cannot be reached until after the recognition of the Empire: I do not believe that, even with all his good will, Chamberlain can do so before Geneva has released the individual governments from their collective obligation. Therefore, late September. Then, better than now, we will be able to judge what gesture would be best to solemnly seal the resumption of our former collaboration.

In the meantime, it is advisable to examine the agenda for the talks. We do not have many suggestions to offer: as far as the Mediterranean is concerned, the agreement of January 2 is exhaustive—or nearly so—unless one wishes to delve into specific issues.

It will, however, be necessary to clearly define the relations between the Empire and the neighboring British colonies. This is a matter to be addressed particularly by political and colonial experts. London should send its own representatives.

I believe the British will have other points to bring up for discussion: radio, propaganda in the Arab countries, armaments in Libya, perhaps Palestine, perhaps the Naval Agreement, etc. We may also discuss, among other—perhaps numerous—omitted matters, Arabia and the Red Sea. These are all issues that can be studied and, in my opinion, resolved without insurmountable difficulties.

The obstacle lay more in attitudes than in the substance of the matter. If we sit down at the table in good faith, an agreement can be reached with relative ease. The first gust of wind has already swept away many clouds—or, at the very least, stirred them up. That is already a great deal, when one considers the leaden atmosphere that, just a few days ago, hung over Europe 203.

Ciano’s letter is incredible, displaying a political superficiality that is truly one of a kind, revealing the conviction not that he was heading into difficult negotiations, but that he already had a resounding

success in the bag: his claim that he could secure recognition of the empire before even beginning negotiations speaks volumes. And, above all, it did not take into account—not even in passing—the very close connection that existed—and that the British were bound to raise during the negotiations—between the Spanish question and Anglo-Italian relations. A letter that left Grandi stunned and frightened, to the point that, in the face of the events that would unfold in August and September, he would come to believe for several months that Rome actually did not want “Faci to be your hosts” (D. Grandi Archive, b. 47, file 114, G. Ciano to D. Grandi, August 2, 1937). As soon as he received the letter, Grandi (who was himself a supporter of a hard line but realized that an agreement with Japan at that moment would not facilitate negotiations with London) replied with a very diplomatic yet firm letter, clearly advising against negotiating and concluding the agreement at that time. Three months earlier, “in the midst of an anti-Italian press campaign,” it “would undoubtedly have had a positive effect”; now, on the eve of negotiations with London, “it could only have a negative influence” (D. Grandi Archive, b. 40, file 93, subfile 2, ins. 3, D. Grandi to G. Ciano, [date illegible] August 1937).

harmonious, but, quite the contrary, the aim was war. Except that he later changed his mind and became convinced that the blame for everything had to be divided equally among German maneuvers to block the agreement, Ciano’s political inconsistency and ambition, and Mussolini’s psychological inability to expose himself to the risk of being accused of weakness by withdrawing from Spain. On August 2, Grandi delivered Mussolini’s letter to Chamberlain; the following day, Ciano gave an interview to the Universal News Service that was fully in line with the new direction Italian-British relations were taking; a week later, the Foreign Office began studying the various aspects of the upcoming negotiations. That same day, off the Spanish coast, a British tanker came under air attack. In the days that followed, other ships—both Spanish and neutral—were attacked in the Mediterranean, as far as the Turkish coast, by aircraft and mysterious submarines that were hard not to regard as Italian or supplied to Franco by Italy. What was happening? What could have prompted Rome to carry out a series of such serious acts that were bound to bring the Spanish question back to the forefront, stir up widespread indignation, and throw the recently established détente with London into crisis?

In the Mediterranean, the situation had been deteriorating since May–June, when several Italian and German ships on patrol off the Spanish coast—as part of the measures adopted by the London Committee for Non-Intervention—had been attacked by Republican aircraft. At first, the Italians had limited themselves to lodging a protest with the Committee. The Germans, on the other hand, had reacted to the attack suffered on May 29 by the *Deutschland* by bombing Almería in retaliation and informing the Committee that they had decided to “cease participating in the surveillance plan” and in the Committee’s work until they received guarantees that such incidents would not be repeated. As Coverdale2M wrote, the German decision had been made without consulting Italy and without having informed it beforehand. In response to a request for an explanation from the Italian side, von Neurath said that it would be better for Italy to remain a member of the Non-Intervention Committee; but Mussolini was unwilling to pursue a course of action different from that of Germany, believing that such conduct could give rise to speculation about differences of opinion between the two countries, with the sole consequence of weakening their influence. He therefore instructed Grandi to inform the committee that the Italian ships would be withdrawn from patrol duties and that the Italian ambassador would no longer attend its meetings.

The German and Italian decision had greatly alarmed Paris and, above all, London (which had also feared that a Soviet plan to completely derail the policy of non-intervention lay at the root of it all), and both had worked to persuade Berlin and Rome to back down. On June 18, however, the Germans reported a new attack, and four days later—after the French and British had refused to implement the agreed-upon measures before appropriate investigations had been carried out—Germany withdrew

definitively from the control operations, promptly followed by Italy.

It cannot be ruled out that these events led Mussolini to believe that the Soviet side was seeking to pave the way for the dispatch of massive aid to the Republican government and that England—and above all France—were in some way complicit. What is certain is that when, on August 3, General Franco telegraphed his ambassador in Rome that all the intelligence in his possession pointed to the imminent dispatch to the Republicans of "massive" Russian aid in the form of tanks (2,500), motorized machine guns (3,000), aircraft (300), etc., and that it was therefore necessary to act urgently to intercept Soviet shipments south of Italy and block the routes to Spain—and had instructed him to request the assistance of the Italian navy for this purpose 205, Mussolini—fearing that Soviet aid would turn the tide of the war—had immediately shown himself willing to consider the request without even bothering to verify the reports on which it was based. On August 5, he received Franco's brother, Nicolas, who delivered a personal letter from the general addressed to him, in which the appeal was renewed; and, while he refused the request to deploy surface vessels for the blockade, he did agree to issue orders for the deployment of six submarines 2O6.

The first torpedo attacks took place between August 10 and 11; others followed through August 18, both off the Spanish coast and in the Strait of Sicily, damaging ships of various nationalities. At the end of the month, two Soviet ships were sunk near Algiers and at Cape Matapan. On the night of August 31–September 1, a British destroyer, mistaken for a Spanish vessel, was also attacked. Two days later, near Valencia, a British merchant ship was sunk. On September 4, Ciano ordered operations to be suspended until further notice, despite the Nationalists' insistence that the naval blockade, if continued throughout the month, would have had decisive effects 207.

The reactions of the press, public opinion, and broad sectors of French and British politics had been extremely intense. In England, government circles—though aware that there was little doubt regarding the submarines' nationality—had initially adopted a very cautious stance, especially those most inclined toward an agreement with Italy. As late as August 24, Chargé d'Affaires G. Crolla—concerned about the possible repercussions of the torpedo attacks —had asked Sargent what basis there was for the rumors circulating in French circles in London that British interest in the agreement with Rome had cooled as a result of the incidents in the Mediterranean and that there were plans to postpone the start of talks; he was told "categorically that no change had occurred in the sentiments and intentions of the British government" 208. In the days that followed, however, the recurrence of the attacks and the increasingly firm and insistent French pressure to induce London to adopt a firm stance 209 (and thus derail the Italian-British rapprochement that Paris feared at that moment more than anything else) had, however, brought about a change in attitude, even though the documentation available today reveals considerable British caution not to be drawn by Paris into overly drastic initiatives, such as direct intervention in Rome 210. In the end, Britain had accepted the idea of convening a conference in Nyon on security in the Mediterranean. Faced with the danger that Italy might remain isolated, Ciano had been forced to order a suspension of operations, and his initial reactions had not been entirely opposed to the initiative. However, a vehement Soviet protest—accusing Italy of being responsible for the sinking of several Russian ships and demanding adequate reparations—prompted him to change his stance immediately, especially since German behavior appeared increasingly unclear; the best way to avoid the risk of becoming completely isolated must have seemed to him to be refusing to participate in the conference and persuading the Germans not to attend either. All of this was justified on the grounds that, following the Soviet accusations, Italy could not sit at the same table with the USSR.

The Nyon Conference took place from September 10 to 17. It took only two days to reach an initial agreement on the submarine issue (a second agreement concerning surface ships and aircraft was

reached in the following days), which was signed on the 14th. It stipulated that the countries participating in the conference (England, France, Bulgaria, Egypt, Greece, Yugoslavia, Romania, Turkey, and the USSR) undertook to attack and destroy any submarine that attacked neutral ships or was found in the vicinity of a location where a neutral ship had been attacked. The task of implementing this decision was assigned to the British and French fleets with regard to the western Mediterranean (with the exception of the Tyrrhenian Sea), the Malta Channel, and the eastern Mediterranean, with the exception of the respective territorial waters, which were assigned to the surveillance of the navies of the various countries present at Nyon.[211]

The exclusion of the Tyrrhenian Sea from the patrols was intended to allow Italy to join the agreement in turn and thus have this sea assigned to its own fleet. Such an offer, however, was obviously unacceptable to Rome. Setting aside all other considerations, accepting it would have meant renouncing its image as a major Mediterranean power. And in fact, Palazzo Chigi rejected it on September 14 with a terse statement that, after reaffirming Italy's vital interests in the Mediterranean, asserted the need for Italy to be "on a footing of absolute equality with any other power, in any area of the Mediterranean."

Anyone relying solely on Ciano's diary might think that, once this statement was issued, Rome sat back and waited for the subsequent Franco-British moves, confident that in the end Paris and London—faced with Italy's uncompromising resolve—would realize they had gone too far, and the entire Nyon operation would fizzle out.[212] In reality, the weeks following the opening of the Nyon Conference were experienced at Palazzo Chigi in an entirely different frame of mind, and it is no exaggeration to say that Ciano's and Mussolini's primary concern was to extricate themselves from the impasse into which they had maneuvered themselves. This was especially true as soon as it became clear that Germany had no intention of fully supporting the Italian position, going so far as to lead London and Paris to believe that it was exerting a moderating influence on Rome.[213] The

2.3 For the German stance throughout this affair—at least as it appeared from the outside—see Ambassador François-Poncet's lengthy report from Berlin dated September 16, 1937, in DDF, vol. II, VI, pp. 797 ff., as well as his telegram of September 22, ibid., pp. 829 ff.

The best evidence of what we are saying lies in how Ciano handled the Nyon affair, in a manner entirely different from what the regime's media sought to portray at the time.

Upon receiving a report from the British and French representatives in Rome regarding the initial resolutions drafted in Nyon, Ciano, on September 13, made a point of emphasizing his "disapproval"; the following day, when pressed to indicate whether Italy would cooperate in the operations against "piracy in the Mediterranean" decided upon by the conference, he first tried to buy time (and, probably, to hint at a counter-maneuver by hiding behind the need to consult Berlin), then issued the communiqué we mentioned earlier. As soon as he became convinced that everyone in Nyon was determined to take the matter seriously and that the resolutions adopted by the conference would be approved even without Italian "approval"—and, more importantly, would be implemented with the utmost decisiveness and speed—his attitude changed immediately, going so far as to have the latest issues of the *Giornale d'Italia*—which had been published with an editorial by Gayda that was too harsh—and, two days later, to have the Italian representative in Geneva conduct a sondage with the French delegation to the League of Nations to ascertain whether the communiqué of the 14th was considered an absolute *fin de non-recevoir* or one that still left the door open to negotiations initiated by France and England. Alerted by this move, the British and French had seized the opportunity presented by the transmission to Italy of the text of the additional decisions regarding air and surface-

ship attacks against neutral vessels—adopted to supplement those concerning submarine attacks—to inform Ciano that any “positive observations” from Italy would be examined “with all the attention they deserve.” With this lifeline thrown to him, Ciano seized it with all his might, desiring nothing more at this point than to extricate himself from the stormy waters into which he and Mussolini had maneuvered themselves without losing too much face in public. On the morning of the 19th, he delivered a verbal communication to the British and French representatives in Rome, specifying that the phrase “equal rights with any other power and in any area of the Mediterranean” was to be understood to mean that Italy would participate in the naval measures adopted at Nyon if its fleet were granted a position “equal” to that assigned to the British and French fleets. And, as if that were not enough, he added that, if this principle were enshrined, Italian participation could be considered immediately assured in theory and would be put into practice as soon as possible—hopefully before his departure on the 24th for Berlin (with whose government, he was careful to point out, the Italian government had been in contact to keep it informed of its position, not for consultations). A retreat, as can be seen, across the board, which on the 21st went so far as to accept, without batting an eye, Paris as the venue for the meetings of the naval experts from the three countries to establish the technical details of the agreement2I4, and which in no way justifies the triumphalist tone with which Ciano presented it in his diary: “It is a fine victory. From accused torpedo attackers to Mediterranean policemen, with the exception of the sunk Russian ships”215. First, because—while it could claim for propaganda purposes that it had been promoted to “policeman” and thus implicitly acquitted of piracy—Italy nevertheless had to definitively renounce torpedo attacks. Second, because the exclusion of the Soviets from patrols in the Mediterranean had certainly not been secured by Italy, but had been desired from the outset and entirely independently by France and, above all, by England. Third, and this brings us to the crux of the entire affair, because—despite their sensational and rapid retreat—Mussolini and Ciano were in reality still, so to speak, in shock and far from certain that having “weathered” Nyon had safeguarded them from far greater trials and dangers.

Even though, for once, nothing leaked to the outside world, at Palazzo Venezia and Palazzo Chigi, the two weeks in Nyon had been among the darkest for the regime since the Matteotti crisis. England’s alignment with France’s positions, the anti-Italian sentiment stirred up in British and French public opinion (not only on the left) by the torpedo attacks and the great prominence given by the Fascist regime—eager to erase the shame of Guadalajara once and for all—to Italy’s participation in the victorious operations against Santander, and the Germans’ ambiguous withdrawal, despite the now imminent visit of Mussolini to Germany, had in fact fueled the most dramatic hypotheses, not excluding the most dramatic of all: that, having abandoned the idea of an agreement, the British lion had embraced the idea of putting an end to the Italian leopard once and for all, and that Nyon was, in practice, nothing more than the first step on the road to a full-scale conflict.

An entry in Ciano’s diary reveals this state of tension. Under the date of September 19, it reads216:

The Duce calls frequently to inquire about developments in the ongoing diplomatic battle. Meanwhile, he is preparing for military action. Bruno will leave for Palma on the 22nd. And with him, the entire Biseo squadron. I envy them. But I am, at least for now, glued to this desk.

In light of what we know today, it is almost certain that the military action Mussolini was preparing was not the CTV operations (which had been practically suspended for the time being after the fall of Santander), but rather those in anticipation of a possible conflict with England and France. Similarly, the departure of the Biseo squadron for the Balearic Islands was not intended to be part of the normal context of aid to Franco, but rather to fit into a broader military framework. Otherwise, the phrase “at least for now” in the last sentence would be unjustified; it makes sense when referring to an actual

conflict, whereas it is inconceivable when referring to the CTV's operations. Unless one wishes to entertain two hypotheses, each more absurd than the other: that Ciano went so far as to consider going —he, the Foreign Minister—"as a volunteer" to Spain, or else resigning as minister.

The best evidence, however, is found in a handwritten personal letter that Ciano wrote to Grandi on September 18, 217:

Dear Dino,

I am writing to you, on the Chief's orders, to ask you about some matters close to his heart and to inform you of certain measures recently taken, which I consider it useful for you to know.

I'll start with the latter. In light of the situation that has arisen, it has been decided to send new forces to Libya: three divisions, which will depart—albeit with reduced numbers—in the coming days.

In addition, several submarines have been transferred to Franco: two for now, and two more shortly, which will operate as legionary forces in territorial waters.

Finally, the air forces in the Balearic Islands have been significantly reinforced. We plan to use them against the "red ports." The blockade that we suspended in international waters will effectively be enforced in the future, making life impossible in the ports of Valencia, Barcelona, Tarragona, Alicante, and Almería. The bombings will be extremely intense and continuous.

I am giving you this information for your confidential knowledge, so that you may better assess the situation and understand the mysteries of future events.

But what the Chief wants to know from you is the actual British mood—what's going on behind the scenes from Nyon onward. You know better than I do how things have gone. As things stand on our part, there's nothing to be done. We wait—calmly and coolly—and also with that formidable resolve you witnessed at Palazzo Venezia.

If there were truly a desire for an agreement, the opportunity offered by our latest note would not have been let slip away. Instead—judging from here, gathering some information, and also reading between the lines of a provocative and blackmailing press—their intentions do not seem clear.

What matters is finding this out in time.

This is what the Duce is asking of you: a swift investigation and your concise—and, as always, level-headed—assessment. Based on this, if not decisions, then at least certain measures of various kinds will be established, for which it is essential to have time and highly advantageous to take the initiative.

I am writing to you—and let this also serve as a guideline for your conduct—because we have had reason to doubt the secrecy of the ciphers.

Despite its convoluted nature and its hints and omissions, the meaning of the letter is clear and immediately brings to mind (aside from the style) another letter that Mussolini had written to Grandi on August 8, 1935.[2],[8] Just as the "Duce" had done then, Ciano wanted to know from Grandi whether, in his opinion, England had decided to go to war with Italy.

At that time, regarding Ethiopia, Grandi had felt confident that he could reassure Mussolini. Now we do not know precisely what he replied to Ciano during a telephone conversation they had on the morning of September 20, immediately after receiving the letter and while a first sign of détente was already emerging in Rome, since—as mentioned—the Anglo-French had shown that they did not intend to drop the probe they had conducted in Geneva. What is certain is that, this time, his response must not have been encouraging, even if at the same time it was surely intended to dissuade Mussolini and Ciano from any inclination toward "preemptive"2W rash moves. Proof of this is the lengthy report that Grandi would send to Ciano on October 11, following Ciano's explicit request for a written response to the letter sent to him the previous month 220.

When Grandi wrote this report, the situation had settled down somewhat, but it was by no means any clearer. On September 30—the very day Mussolini and Ciano returned to Rome from Germany—Anglo-French-Italian naval experts in Paris had reached an agreement on patrols in the Mediterranean. The Italian fleet had been assigned the area between Crete, Port Said, the Gulf of Sollum, and the entrance to the Adriatic. The principle of full "parity," however, remained on paper—that is, neither contested nor affirmed (as Rome would have wished). The political crux of the situation, however, had now shifted. Riding the momentum of the success achieved at the Nyon Conference, the French had launched a massive campaign aimed at binding England even more closely to their policy (where the events of August and September had placed Chamberlain in serious difficulty and brought Eden's leadership on foreign policy back to the forefront) and at persuading it to take advantage of the situation to exert strong pressure on Rome and corner it on the Spanish issue. As Delbos had told Eden on September 17, Italy's involvement in Spain and its presence in Majorca could elicit only two responses: either an Anglo-French occupation of Minorca or a forceful joint move against Rome (accompanied by pressure on Berlin to distance itself from Italy should the latter prove intransigent) to resolve the issue of Fascist intervention in Spain, while at the same time "solemnly" warning Mussolini that, otherwise, the Pyrenean border would be reopened to aid for the Republican government. The British had rejected the first option and had exerted considerable pressure on France to hold back. They had, however, agreed to the proposal for a decisive move against Rome, even though they had opposed any reopening of the Franco-Spanish border and had persuaded Paris to postpone the move until after Mussolini's visit to Germany, so as not to push the "Duce" further into Hitler's arms. On October 2, England and France thus sent a joint note to Italy inviting the government in Rome to undertake talks as soon as possible, aimed at reaching, if possible, an agreement on measures suitable for ensuring the implementation of an effective policy of non-intervention. Once the repatriation of the volunteers had been completed, the note concluded, the question of recognizing "under certain conditions" the rights of belligerence for the two warring parties (as requested by Italy on behalf of the nationalists) might be amenable to a solution. The Italian response, which was obviously negative, was delivered on October 9. According to the response, the issue of non-intervention concerned not only France, England, and Italy, but also other countries, and without the support of the governments of Burgos and Valencia, any decision would be unable to yield practical results. The Fascist government was therefore of the opinion that it was advisable to continue discussing the matter within the London Committee and also pointed out that, in any case, it would not participate in any kind of initiative to which it had not been invited or in which Germany was not also participating.[221] At that time, official reactions from Paris and London were still pending; in Rome, however, there was no reason to hope that they might be "positive," and fears of the worst were resurfacing. Hence, on October 10, Ciano's request to Grandi for a detailed report in response to his personal letter of September 18, updating him on the situation beyond what he had already told him by telephone on September 20.

2.8 "Dear Grandi, as things stand, the question is whether G[reat] B[ritain] is willing to go to war with us to prevent us from going to war with Ethiopia. It is therefore necessary for me to have your

impressions on the matter." See Mussolini, XLII, p. 114.

2.9 See, however, in G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 42, the following entry dated October 4: "Received the Duke of Aosta this morning, who gave me a report on his trip to England. According to him, an agreement should be possible. But, if pushed to the limit, England could also go to war—and do so effectively. He repeated Grandi's words."

Grandi's response was very skillful: "2. He praised Ciano's firmness and skill in rejecting the Anglo-French note, using expressions that would most flatter the young minister. He then foresaw a situation of 'ups and downs' for the immediate future—all things considered, he implied, not too dangerous:

Whenever there has been a deterioration in Italian-British relations, the French government (in its three fundamental components: the Popular Front, the General Staff, and the Quai d'Orsay) has immediately sought to take advantage of it and to drag England into positions so extreme against Italy as to make it subsequently difficult, if not impossible, for England to withdraw with dignity. To finally establish an armed bloc of the two democracies, forcing Italy to choose between humiliation and war: this was the aim of France's actions, and this is what happened after Málaga and Guadalajara, after the Coronation, after Bilbao, after Santander, and after the incidents in the Mediterranean and at Nyon. From the outset, England has always gone along with this, yet has consistently—at least until now—refused at the last moment to follow France in this dangerous game.

After this introduction, Grandi finally got to the heart of the matter and addressed the two-part question regarding the actual British sentiment and London's "intentions" concerning Italy. And he did so in clear terms, though careful to avoid offending Ciano's "hypersensitivity" with negative assessments of the past that could not change the terms of the situation but might predispose a man like Ciano—who was already prejudiced against him—to view his words negatively, especially given how much it must have cost him to write to him as he had. The first question was easy to answer:

On the Spanish question, British sentiment is decidedly hostile toward Italy. The differences—or rather, the nuances—in this sentiment of hostility are due more to the way the various political factions express themselves, but these differences are, in essence, barely perceptible. Throughout the eighteen months of the Italo-Abyssinian conflict—or, to be more precise, the Italo-British conflict—there have always been political groups in England favorable to us. At the most critical moments, these political groups, through their intervention, effectively neutralized—within Parliament, within the Cabinet itself, and in public opinion—the left's campaign of anti-Italian and anti-fascist agitation. These political groups, which we then referred to for simplicity as "British anti-sanctionists," gradually grew in number to the point of winning over the most influential member of the Baldwin Cabinet, Neville Chamberlain; it was due to his pressure—both within and, above all, outside the Cabinet—that the British government decided in June 1936 to lift the sanctions. On the subject of Spain, however, everyone—from the "Diehards" on the far right to the radicals on the far left—agrees in viewing Italian action in Spain as an imminent threat to what the British call "vital interests." These factors—and certainly not ideologies—have been the driving forces that have stirred, slowly at first but with steadily increasing momentum, the reluctant, pacifist spirit of the British people.

Public sentiment, too, has undergone a noticeable change this year. During the Abyssinian conflict, anti-Italian demonstrations organized by pacifist and anti-fascist groups were frequent and boisterous, but the British public at large never allowed itself to be swayed by anti-Italian propaganda. Today, these

noisy anti-fascist demonstrations have become quite rare, but public sentiment (especially since the Coronation) has turned coldly hostile, if not frankly hostile. In 1935–1936, Mussolini was either applauded or booed in British movie theaters. Today, the Duce's appearance is met with a cold and hostile silence. The British—both the general public and the ruling class—now regard Italy as their number one potential enemy. All the considerable weight of hatred, resentment, and fear that the British harbored until recently toward Nazi Germany has shifted to Fascist Italy.

During the sanctions, with the exception of a small minority, the possibility of a war between England and Italy was not considered a likely scenario. One of the many reasons for our success was precisely that we forced the British to view war as an almost inevitable consequence of their own policy. This was enough to prompt the British to immediately back down, deeply concerned, and do everything in their power to avert this possibility. Today the situation is different. The possibility of a war between Italy and England is considered a likely scenario. The public, while appearing to realize the difficulties and dangers for England of a conflict with Italy, nonetheless discusses it as a calamity that may become necessary to face.

Given this political and psychological climate, it is no surprise that Chamberlain's honest and courageous attempt at the end of July—aimed at breaking the deadlock in Italian-British relations once and for all—has, at least for the moment, failed...

It was more difficult to answer the second question, and Grandi addressed it in successive steps:

You ask me what is going on behind the scenes in Nyon. Nyon is nothing more than an attempt—this time successful—by Eden and the Foreign Office to regain control and the initiative in British foreign policy, which Chamberlain had managed to assume exclusively for himself at the end of July... In this abnormal psychological and political situation, any day is a good day, so to speak, for us and the British to come to blows in the Mediterranean, even without either side having any premeditated intention to do so. The Duce did very well to send three divisions to Libya and to put in place all the necessary measures to deal with any eventuality.

When news reaches them here that our troops are departing for Libya—that is, for the Egyptian border—they prick up their ears and their spirits calm down... The more we demonstrate that we believe in the possibility of a Franco-British aggression against us, and that we are coldly determined and ready to face a war provoked by others, the more the British will do everything possible to avert this possibility—which, however, at the present moment and for objective reasons, is not, I repeat, a possibility that can be ruled out outright.

The so-called analytical part of the report ended here. It was followed by a conclusion that, in fact, constituted the true core of Grandi's speech. Given that it was difficult, if not impossible, to give a definitive answer regarding the British's actual intentions—both because, since England was not a totalitarian regime, decisions of this kind did not rest with a single man, and because the experience of July 1914 (when, in less than forty-eight hours, London had first announced its neutrality, then its entry into the war) demonstrated that the most important decisions could be determined "outside of any calculated or anticipated plan" by last-minute events, so that—and here Grandi was speaking to his daughter-in-law so that his mother-in-law would understand—what needed to be monitored above all were "the events" (because in them "undoubtedly lies the danger of the current situation"), he wrote in fact:

As I write this, on October 11, I believe I can rule out the possibility that the British Cabinet—a body

composed of about twenty people who decide collectively or by majority vote—intends to go to war with Italy. I believe I can rule out that Chamberlain has even the faintest intention of doing so. On the contrary, I am convinced that he will not abandon (Chamberlain, whom I met a few days ago, once again made a point of repeating this to me personally) the initiative already taken last July to achieve a reconciliation with Italy, which he has reaffirmed is and will remain a cornerstone of his policy. I believe I can equally rule out that the Admiralty has the will or a plan, at least at this moment, to go to war with Italy. On the contrary, the Admiralty continues today, as it did in 1935 and 1936, to act as a moderating force on the Foreign Office, consistently intervening to ensure that the Foreign Office, in turn, acts as a moderator in Paris. I understand that, immediately after Nyon, the Admiralty took decisive action in this regard. The statement issued the other day—a flat denial of the alleged attack by a pirate submarine, naturally Italian, against the ship "Basilisk"—was released directly by the Admiralty, with the Prime Minister's authorization, and against the wishes of the Foreign Office, which did everything in its power to stop this communication, calling it unnecessary and untimely, but on which the Admiralty insisted in order to put an end to a second round of anti-Italian speculation that was already beginning to take shape, similar to that which followed the alleged failure to torpedo the "Havoc."

Despite all this, any incident could nevertheless precipitate the situation. The margins have been narrowing and resistance waning: it would come as no surprise if a state of truly acute tension were to trigger an automatic escalation.

Should these eventualities occur, it is my conviction that England would fight to the bitter end. England is still far from being as prepared and armed as it aims to be and as it will eventually be, but it is certain that these two years of feverish industrial, mechanical, and even moral preparation have given the English a confidence and self-assurance that they certainly did not possess in August 1935 when, upon the appearance of the two divisions at the Egyptian border, England, for the first time since Trafalgar, suddenly found itself faced with the choice between the danger of a Mediterranean war for which it was unprepared—both in arms and in spirit—and humiliation, ultimately choosing the latter. Even among the Conservatives themselves, there are those who believe that we must take advantage of this moment—when France seems intent on taking the initiative in a policy of force, when Germany is not yet militarily ready, and when solidarity between Italy and Germany, in their view, has not yet been fully established—to resolve the "Mediterranean nightmare." These are few in number, and their voice lacks authority at this moment—but they do exist.

These are, in essence, the elements of the situation, which only the Duce, with his prophetic instinct, can weigh and evaluate in light of other, certainly more important and decisive factors known only to him.

The failure of the grotesque Franco-British ultimatum—a failure brought about by our response the day before yesterday—has suddenly placed the initiative for international action back in Italy's hands.

The hardest wars to win are those that must be won day by day.

Reports of this level and tone had not reached Palazzo Chigi for quite some time. Despite Grandi's caution and his ad hoc flattery directed at him and the "Duce," more than one of his remarks must have irritated Ciano. The picture and forecasts presented, however, left no room for initiatives or shrewd maneuvers that might have led to those "events" that Grandi had recommended keeping under the strictest control. Even if one were to dismiss what Grandi wrote regarding Chamberlain's continued willingness to reconcile with Italy—once the three-way talks had been rejected—if one wished to

prevent new initiatives by France 223 and not provide it with further grounds to influence London, and, possibly, to try to restore hope and credibility to those within the British government and the Conservative Party who were less inclined to dramatize the situation and to have British policy follow in the wake of French policy, the only course of action was to take some conciliatory steps and avoid making new missteps in Spain.

In the first regard—once he had "saved face" by refusing to yield to Anglo-French threats—Mussolini was willing to go quite far, provided he could disguise his retreat and present it as a constructive initiative of his own. Significant is what is recorded in Ciano's diary under the date of October 11, 224:

The Duce, who is following [the situation] very closely with calm and also with formidable determination, called me a second time this evening. He spoke about various issues. He believes that a committee of six powers (Italy, France, Great Britain, Germany, Portugal, and Russia) could resolve the issue of the volunteers as well as those related to belligerence.

For the time being, however, Ciano did not believe he should go that far. Probably encouraged as well by the fact that on the evening of October 8—while Italy's response to the Anglo-French note of the 2nd was still pending—Chamberlain, speaking at his party's convention, had made no secret of his hope that the Italian response would be favorable and could thus constitute real progress in resolving the Spanish question, thereby also making possible the start of the planned Anglo-Italian talks (which the French had done everything in their power to make disappear completely from the political horizon)—on the 15th he instructed Grandi to adopt a conciliatory stance within the Non-Intervention Committee 225:

We must concede something. Therefore, make three points: be ready to discuss the plan for the evacuation of volunteers; ask the parties to the conflict about their intentions in this regard, and if these are positive, then establish an evacuation plan; at the same time, secure recognition of belligerent status.

Armed with these instructions, Grandi immediately adopted a position so flexible and conciliatory that it differed almost not at all from the British one, thereby isolating the USSR within the London committee, putting France in a difficult position, and—most importantly—reviving Chamberlain's hopes of resuming talks with Rome.

The approach to the actual situation in Spain, however—as usual—was far more convoluted. At the height of the crisis, Ciano had been well aware of the need to avoid missteps. His diary speaks volumes on this point as well. Under the date of October 5, it reads[226]:

Long conversation with Pariani on the situation in Spain. He would favor sending a large force of Alpine troops to break through to Valencia. But what would the Franco-British reactions be? Is it advisable to take initiatives that could lead to a conflict? I say no. First, because Germany is not ready. It will be in three years. Second, because we are short on raw materials and ammunition. Finally, because such a conflict would make us universally hated. However, the situation in Spain is serious and deserves a swift solution. I will discuss this with the Duce.

236 Ibid., p. 43. See also the note of October 12 along the same lines: "I met with Russo regarding the new contingents of CC.NN. for Spain. For now, I am opposed to sending them. Too dangerous" (p. 45).

Mussolini, for his part, was uncertain. He wanted "firsthand impressions," so much so that, to obtain

them, it was decided to send Anfuso on a mission to Spain. A few days passed, and since the rejection of the proposal by Paris and London was not followed by any other “threatening” moves, fear began to give way, as usual, to a greater sense of security, and the idea resurfaced that, all things considered, they might even dare to act and succeed. Once again, Ciano’s diary is revealing. Already under the date of October 14, we read 227:

The note has been accepted in its fundamental points by London and Paris. I am surprised by this. After the threats of the last few days, this Franco-British retreat leads one to reflect on the decline of these two nations. A time will come—or perhaps it has already come—when we will be able to dare everything and play the ultimate game.

At first, however, action was taken with some caution. The previously arranged shipments of aircraft and ships to the Nationalists were not canceled, but for the time being no further shipments took place, despite the urgings of the CTV command and General Pariani. However, when on October 19 Franco himself requested a division to definitively crush the Asturian front—even though Mussolini had found the situation “dismal”—the division was granted 228, only to be held back once Gijón was captured, as its contribution was no longer deemed necessary. By now, even Ciano was beginning to think of Spain as “this damned war” 229; but neither he nor Mussolini was capable of extricating themselves from it. At the end of the year, when even the commander of the CTV proposed withdrawing the infantry, Ciano—instead of supporting him—was overcome by the fear of losing face: “We cannot risk Italy’s prestige over twenty infantry battalions,” and he shifted the entire burden of the decision onto Mussolini 230:

Tomorrow we’ll go together to see the Duce. He’ll listen to me and decide. I wonder, however, whether —given all the efforts made and sacrifices endured—it makes sense to withdraw just when, due to the minor setback at Teruel, Franco’s star isn’t shining as brightly as it did two months ago. Wouldn’t we be taking responsibility for a failure of the Nationalists? Aren’t we giving new courage to the Reds and to those who supply and support them? Aren’t we perhaps giving the Spaniards themselves the chance to rid themselves too cheaply of the debt of gratitude they owe—and must owe—to us? The Duce will answer these questions tomorrow. The issue deserves the most careful consideration. Every decision has its drawbacks. This Spanish affair is long and burdensome.

Ciano was opposed, and Mussolini, too, spoke out against the withdrawal of the infantry: the “volunteers” would remain in Spain “until further notice.” However, since Franco’s strategy—more political than military—did not at all correspond to Italian interests, threatened to prolong the war for months if not years, and entailed endless investment on the Italian side in both men and money, it was necessary to finally make Franco understand that he had to seek a decisive military solution and that, to this end, a single Spanish-Italian-German command had to be established. General Berti was sent by Franco for this purpose with precise instructions, even before consulting the Germans.[231] But a few days later, as soon as the Battle of Teruel seemed on the verge of a victorious outcome, the usual rollercoaster of enthusiasm and hope[232] resumed, reaching the point of recklessness. Suffice it to say that, with the Legionary Air Force having begun to bomb Barcelona and other “red” locations on a massive scale, Ciano went so far as to ask General Valle—he, the Minister of Foreign Affairs—to participate in one of the upcoming operations... 233. However, once the inevitable cold shower had set in, he returned to fretting and decided on yet another move against Franco—this time a personal one from Mussolini—threatening to withdraw Italian troops if Franco did not resolve to prepare and carry out “to the very end” “a mass battle leading to the destruction of the enemy apparatus.”

Mussolini wrote this letter on February 2, 1938. Twenty days later, Franco had still not replied. On February 23, the “Duce” sent a telegram urging a response and, growing increasingly irritated, ordered the air force stationed in the Balearic Islands three days later to refrain from any action. It was only in the very last days of February that Franco finally got in touch. His letter (formally dated… February 16) theoretically agreed with Mussolini (“I have never counted on the spontaneous collapse of the enemy’s rear. I have always planned to bring it about through a crushing victory and the annihilation of the enemy army”), but in practice reiterated his conviction that it was necessary to act with extreme caution. As for the Italian troops, he did not explicitly ask for them to remain, but framed the issue in a way that effectively silenced the “Duce”: “Their presence in Spain is viewed throughout the world as an act of solidarity with our nation, whereas their absence would give the impression, on the international stage, of abandonment”2*5. This was precisely what Mussolini had increasingly feared and feared even more at that moment, as the outlook for him in Austria was growing ever darker and he now found himself in an absolute necessity to come to terms with England, but—precisely for this reason—could no longer withdraw from Spain for fear of being accused that this was the price he had had to pay to London.

To say that Anglo-Italian relations had made no substantial progress since October 1937 solely because of the Spanish question would be an exaggeration; however, it would also be difficult to view the Spanish question as anything other than the main cause of the difficulties that had made it impossible to resume the dialogue begun in late July—a dialogue that the August–September crisis had, at least as far as Chamberlain’s and Mussolini’s intentions were concerned, interrupted but not severed. Various other political and psychological factors had contributed to making a détente difficult. Among these was the British tendency to act, as far as possible, in close coordination with France—a fact that, given that Paris at that time was fundamentally opposed to an Anglo-Italian agreement and, indeed, tended to pressure London to adopt an intransigent stance toward Italy that would continue the hard line inaugurated at Nyon — made it difficult, even if desired, to take effective steps to concretely restart talks with Rome, given that Rome, while affirming its desire for an agreement with England, nevertheless seemed adamant in refusing to involve France in any way and showed not even the slightest willingness to take any conciliatory action toward Paris that might facilitate matters for the British.[26] On the other hand, London also tended to prioritize the German aspect of the appeasement policy, with the result of providing fresh fuel (as in November, when Halifax had visited Berlin) for Mussolini’s suspicions and fears that the British and Germans were reaching an agreement behind his back. Nor should we underestimate the influence that, on some of the leaders of British foreign policy, was exerted by the concern—ideological, economic, and political, especially in relation to the increasingly difficult situation in the Far East—to act in concert with the U.S., which did not look favorably at all on England yielding on the matter of principle regarding the de jure recognition of the Fascist empire

36 The only—and, to the best of our knowledge, inexplicable—reference to the possibility of Italian-French collaboration to defend “Latin culture” appeared in *La Tribuna* on November 19, 1937 (coinciding with Halifax’s visit to Germany) in an article by F. Scardaoni, “The Press and Europe: The Most Grave Political Error of Our Time.” According to the aforementioned diary of G. Ciano, p. 59, the article was not inspired by higher-ups, and Mussolini was greatly irritated by it.

to conclude an agreement that was viewed in Washington with the deepest skepticism and that appeared to conflict with the plans Roosevelt had been entertaining between late 1937 and early 1938 to launch a

major initiative aimed, in his view, halt the progressive deterioration of the international situation through a series of agreements concerning arms reduction, equal access to raw materials, and laws governing the conduct of war—or, alternatively, to expose and morally and politically isolate Germany, Italy, and Japan should they have abandoned or rejected it 237. On the Italian side, the factor that made

237 See especially A. Eden, Memoirs, op. cit., I, pp. 685 ff. American hostility toward recognizing the Empire (also demonstrated by the difficulties encountered in 1937 during negotiations to renew the trade and navigation treaty between the two countries, given that Italy wanted the preamble of the new treaty to refer to the king also as Emperor of Ethiopia) was not only a matter of principle but also depended largely on the hostility aroused in the U.S. by Italy's rapprochement with Germany and, subsequently, by Rome's pro-Japanese policy. As for Germany, Suvich had been quite clear in a report dated February 4, 1937: "It is true that, until four years ago, Fascist Italy enjoyed a relatively favorable reception among a segment of the population, but the situation has now fundamentally changed. What turned American public opinion against Fascist Italy was the rise of National Socialism, with its demonstrations in America, and the Ethiopian war.

"The Ethiopian crisis has been resolved, and the work of civilization and peace that Italy is carrying out in Africa—if properly highlighted here—cannot fail to win the sympathy of the American public. The issue of Nazism falls within the general framework of our foreign policy. Nazism has harmed us above all because, in the eyes of the American public, the two movements have to some extent been conflated, and certain distinctly Nazi manifestations—which here meet with general disapproval—have been attributed to Fascism... Given the current situation, based on a division between fascist powers and democratic powers, there is no doubt that America's sympathies lie with the latter group—even if Russia were to be part of it, and especially if Japan were to join the group of fascist powers. This sympathy today could translate into aid tomorrow in the event of a conflict, despite any neutrality laws that Congress might pass. Even before entering World War I, America maintained a stance of neutrality that then changed radically within a few months.

"Another point worth noting is that America will always tend to come to England's aid when it is in danger, for two main reasons. On the one hand, there is the bond of blood and the tradition that unites the two nations; on the other, there is this country's conviction that England is an indispensable element of the world balance and the nation on which one can most rely to maintain peace" (ASAE, USA, b. 32 [1936–37]).

Furthermore, it should be noted that while Roosevelt's principal aides, C. Hull and S. Welles, were clearly opposed to recognizing the Empire, other U.S. political figures, including the ambassador to Rome, W. Phillips, considered it appropriate as a means to "respond" to the "hardening" of Italian policy and to break the deadlock in Italian-British relations. See W. Phillips to C. Hull, December 20, 1937, in Roosevelt Papers, PSF, Italy: State Department (1937).

In the same report, the ambassador focused on the domestic situation in Italy, writing: "The atmosphere here in Rome is very anxious. The intelligentsia is not in favor of these close ties with Germany and Japan, but expresses itself—if at all—only in whispers. The Duce has completely hypnotized the masses, who are ready to follow him wherever he wishes to lead them. As for the Duce, he sees no diplomats except the German Ambassador, and has clearly demonstrated that he does not wish to see Americans, no matter how important they may be. I therefore have no opportunity to speak with him, and my only contact with him is thus through Ciano. This is unsatisfactory because one never knows precisely what Ciano omits. Mussolini is increasingly isolating himself, and the natural result may well be a hardening of his attitude toward his critics and a sense of satisfaction in worrying them through

closer association with his German and Japanese friends."

Roosevelt's position was more complex. The president—who at that time was also influenced by various contingent considerations stemming from the 1938 election—was undoubtedly hostile to fascism, but not so much as to consider Italy already irrevocably tied to Germany; he therefore could not rule out the possibility of exerting a positive influence on Italy by leveraging, on the one hand, Mussolini's personality and, on the other hand, on Italy's economic difficulties. What had made détente particularly difficult, however, was above all the systematic resort to the "softening" tactic of threats and indirect pressure—ranging from the now-traditional measures employed to create difficulties for the British in the Arab world to the, so to speak, new ones made possible by the deteriorating situation in the Far East and the Sino-Japanese conflict 238. Italy's accession to the Anti-Comintern Pact on November 6 239 and the distinctly pro-Japanese stance adopted by Italy at the Conference of the Nine Powers—convened around the same time in Brussels to discuss the Sino-Japanese conflict and seek a solution—had caused particular irritation and concern in London. In a situation of tension and crisis, these Italian initiatives certainly could not foster détente. In a different context, however, it would have been precisely these initiatives—given their obvious instrumental nature—that might have prevented détente. Even W. Churchill was certain that Mussolini did not wish to be drawn into a conflict with England, much less with both England and France. To this end, as early as the end of 1936, Roosevelt had told Suvich that he was willing to meet with Mussolini "on a cruise to European waters" to discuss the world situation with him (ASAE, USA, b. 32 [1936–37], Suvich's report dated December 18, 1936), and he made the same proposal in October 1937 to Vittorio Mussolini, whom he received in a strictly private capacity during the latter's trip to the United States for film-related reasons (see V. Mussolini, *Vita con mio padre*, Verona 1957, pp. 79 ff.). Roosevelt's moment of greatest "openness" toward Italy was likely in July 1937, before the Mediterranean crisis, when he personally wrote to Mussolini and reiterated to Suvich his desire to meet with the "Duce." See, in this regard, Document I in the Appendix: the report sent to Rome by Suvich on July 30. Even after the Mediterranean crisis and Italy's alignment with Japan's positions at the Nine-Power Conference (which had dealt a severe blow to the remaining sympathy for Italy in the U.S.), the American side nevertheless made an effort not to lose ties with Italy and, at least in words, to appeal to Mussolini's pride for this purpose. As Suvich reported in a dispatch dated February 17, 1938, C. Hull was still keen at that time to let him know that, despite everything, "Roosevelt still regards the Duce as the politician who could help him more than anyone else tomorrow in such an endeavor" (ensuring economic stability as a prerequisite for political peace).

238 In 1937, relations began, among other things, between the regime and the Indian nationalist leader Chandra Bose, who, over the course of the year, had several meetings with Mussolini and Ciano. See ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Division of General Affairs and Intelligence, Category I. 4. 1, Austria. Anti-fascist subversive movement. 1937, note from the Third Section dated December 18, 1937; as well as G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 88 ff.; S. C. Bose, *La lotta dell'India* (1920–1934), Florence 1942, p. 308.

239 That Italy's accession to the Anti-Comintern Pact was primarily intended to put pressure on England is clear from what Grandi wrote to Ciano on November 9. In early August, immediately after the exchange of letters between Chamberlain and Mussolini, Grandi—as has been noted—had declared himself opposed to Italy's accession, fearing it might have a negative impact on the upcoming Italian-British negotiations. With those negotiations now off the table, Grandi, too, was in favor of accession. "I have the impression," he wrote to Ciano, "that the move has hit the bullseye from every point of view." Italy's accession to the pact, he continued, had thrown into crisis those who advocated a policy of intransigence toward Rome and one of flattery and understanding toward Berlin, demonstrating to

them that the Axis was not a purely demonstrative and ideological bluff destined to fail in the face of divergent Italian and German interests, but a reality capable of bringing other forces into its fold as well. See D. Grandi Archive, b. 40, file 93, subfile 2, insert 3, D. Grandi to G. Ciano, November 9, 1937.

According to data from the British Admiralty, the Italian fleet at that time was equal to 48 percent of the British fleet, but 50 percent of that was in the North Sea, 13 percent in the Far East, 8 percent in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, and only 27 percent in the Mediterranean—a fact that made "British policy toward Italy extremely cautious." See DDF, VII, p. 304.

taken together, and that its "great-power diplomacy" was aimed solely at strengthening its position as much as possible in the Mediterranean. As he wrote in the *Evening Standard* on October 15, 1937, the only danger of war lay "in the fact that he might believe that, under a direct threat of war, the British government might back down as it did during the Ethiopian conflict." Hence the need for England and France to act in the closest possible coordination and "leave Mr. Mussolini in no doubt as to the stance these governments might ultimately be forced to take." A position, as can be seen, that was quite lucid and firm, but which—as it was formulated—did not a priori rule out the possibility of an agreement with Italy. And, in fact, the real crux of Anglo-Italian relations lay in the limits that England was willing to grant to Italian "power" in the Mediterranean and in the degree of trust that, after the continuous "disappointments" of the past three years, the two sides were capable of establishing with one another. Everything else ultimately became secondary to these two factors—one purely political, the other purely psychological—especially as far as Mussolini and Ciano were concerned, for whom both politics and trust were far more heavily laden than for British policymakers with irrational and sometimes personal motivations, prejudices, and, when things seemed to be going well for them, even delusional fantasies about British "decline" and Italian "power"—which led them for a time to believe that, all things considered, a rapprochement with England was not really all that necessary 240—except that, when nightmares replaced those dreams, they would be seized by mistrust and fear and take refuge in dangerous leaps forward toward Germany, which, while still did not truly affect the reality of the regime's foreign policy, nevertheless contributed to further deteriorating the international situation and strengthened the pro-German faction in Italy.

Given these circumstances, the real obstacle to an agreement with England was the Spanish question. Although Chamberlain and a significant faction of the Conservative Party were convinced of the advisability of reaching an agreement with Italy, the Spanish question was, in fact, the crux of the entire operation for them: the moral crux, the political crux, and the crux of "trust" that had to be resolved in order to conclude the agreement and gain acceptance for it from the rest of the party, British public opinion, and France. And the most resolute on this point was Eden, who—for his part—considered Mussolini a "gangster" with whom any agreement would be worthless and who, while accepting the idea of a possible "agreement" with Italy, did so only to leave no stone unturned and because he could not ignore the balance of power within the government and the party, but was determined to reach it only on his own terms.

240 A typical example in this regard is an entry in G. Ciano's Diary (p. 76) dated December 31, 1937: "The offensive in Spain is proceeding well... The Duce, in good spirits, asked Valle in my presence about the strength of the air force. By the end of the year, 3,000 aircraft as planned, plus 750 additional ones. He told me that under these conditions, if the British do not reach an agreement, the day of that famous bulletin is drawing near!"

On the eve of the Nyon Conference, Eden had written to Churchill241:

Now is the time to bring Italy back into compliance with its international obligations... It does not appear that Germany is ready to enter into a major conflict within the year, and, if we hope to establish friendly relations with Italy in the future, matters should be brought to a conclusion now. The danger threatening us stems from Mussolini's certainty that he can bluff and talk tough to force us to back down in the end after some pointless chatter."

Bolstered by this conviction, the foreign minister had worked tirelessly to ensure the success of the conference and then in the subsequent Anglo-French initiative of October 2. After Italy's rejection of the proposal to initiate three-way talks on Spain, he had not followed the French in their hardline stance and, indeed, had made considerable efforts to moderate them; this does not, however, mean that he had altered his fundamental position in the slightest. This is demonstrated by the fact that one of the first things Chamberlain and Ball made clear to Grandi when the talks between them resumed was that they would not use the usual encrypted telegrams (which could be decrypted by the Foreign Office) in their communications with Rome regarding these matters, but "only letters or reports" sent by courier 242. And in fact, even though the prime minister and some members of the government were eager to resume discussions with Rome—and the Italian side had taken various steps to pick up where talks had left off in August—Anglo-Italian relations had made no progress for several months. On November 6, the very day Ciano signed the Anti-Comintern Pact, a démarche by Grandi to the Foreign Office—suggesting the opportunity to begin the "planned" negotiations in order to prevent Italy from succumbing to German pressure otherwise—had elicited from Eden only a vague and evasive response. And another approach, a little less than a month later, had elicited an even more discouraging response: for England to consider recognizing the empire, Italy would first have to withdraw its volunteers from Spain, clear out the Balearic Islands, cease its propaganda directed at the Arabs, and tone down the anti-British rhetoric in its press 243.

Mussolini's response was not long in coming. A week later, on the evening of December 11, 1937, following an ad hoc meeting of the Grand Council, the "Duce" announced from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia that Italy was withdrawing from the League of Nations 244.

"For many long years," he had said, "we have sought to offer the world a display of unprecedented patience. We had not forgotten—and will not forget—the shameful attempt to economically strangle the Italian people perpetrated in Geneva. But some believed that at a certain point the League of Nations would make a gesture of due reparation. It did not do so. It refused to do so...

Under these conditions, our presence at the gates of Geneva was no longer tolerable. It offended our principles, our style, and our temperament as soldiers...

Italy's withdrawal from the League of Nations is an event of great historical significance, one that has attracted the world's attention and whose consequences are not yet fully foreseeable.

This does not mean, however, that we are abandoning our fundamental political principles, which are aimed at cooperation and peace...

In Italy, Mussolini's decision had taken most people by surprise, but it had not made much of an impact either. In a certain sense, it had been met with relief. In the days immediately preceding the Grand Council meeting, a sense of uncertainty and fear had been spreading in various circles, giving rise to the most disparate speculations; so much so that, after the announcement, there were those who

claimed that Mussolini had actually intended to make a different decision but had ultimately had to abandon his plans and settled for withdrawing from Geneva 245. At the diplomatic level, however, Mussolini's decision had come as less of a surprise. The French chargé d'affaires in Rome had anticipated it as soon as he learned of the convening of the Grand Council and had offered the most accurate explanation: the "Duce" had sought to make any Anglo-German rapprochement more difficult (after Italy's withdrawal from the League of Nations, Germany's return to Geneva would have been impossible, unless Berlin were willing to deal a "fatal" blow to the Axis) and had also wanted to "make it clear

245 See DDF, vol. II, VII, pp. 759 ff., F. Charles-Roux to Y. Delbos, December 20, 1937. According to the *Informazioni Cremonesi*, on December 11 and 14, two scenarios circulating in Roman political circles were that the Grand Council would announce the establishment of the office of Grand Chancellor for life for Mussolini and, indeed, the king's abdication.

"It is poor tactics for England to systematically try to buy time and 'chloroform' the negotiations with Rome." 246. This is likely how Chamberlain understood it, especially since in the following weeks—whether it was the Italian chargé d'affaires in London, Crolla; Ciano in Rome with the British ambassador; or Mussolini himself during a chance encounter— on January 5, 1938, at the Opera House with Perth himself, had been careful to emphasize Italy's desire to overcome the "psychological" obstacles dividing the two countries and to reach a "full and complete" agreement 247.

For Chamberlain, the time had finally come to pick up where he had left off in August. Eden, however, remained much more cautious and essentially hostile. This explains, on the one hand, the gradual intensification in early January 1938 of the differences between the prime minister and his foreign minister 248 and, on the other hand, the prime minister's increasingly marked tendency to try to break the deadlock without the knowledge and behind the back of the foreign minister, resorting to personal, non-diplomatic means and "channels." One of these "channels"—the least important and the most difficult to keep hidden from Eden and the Foreign Office—was Chamberlain's own sister-in-law, Lady Ivy. While on a pleasure trip to Italy, Austen Chamberlain's widow had held several meetings with Ciano and Mussolini, during which she showed them two letters written to her by her brother-in-law in which (especially in the second one, which Ciano and Mussolini had seen on February 1) he stated his willingness to formally recognize the empire and to begin talks on the agreement by the end of February. Mussolini had "approved and agreed," stating that he wanted an agreement that was "comprehensive, lasting, and such as to form the basis of cooperation between the two empires," and had practically dictated the reply to Lady Ivy on behalf of her brother-in-law 249. The second and far more important "channel" was the London-based one run by A. Dingli, which Grandi had managed to reactivate as early as October through an operation similar to the one he had already carried out in July —and which alone explains how a cautious and responsible man like Chamberlain could, as a result, have considered acting behind Eden's back and gone so far as to write certain things to his sister-in-law.

After the dramatic weeks of August and September, all of Grandi's efforts had been directed toward mending the situation and, in particular, toward convincing Chamberlain that Mussolini still wanted reconciliation and that "the unfortunate incidents in the Mediterranean were to be considered circumstances beyond his control." To achieve this result, Grandi had decided to fabricate a new message from the "Duce" for the prime minister. The question, however, was how to reach him. Here is how Grandi himself, in a diary entry dedicated to reconstructing the events that led to Eden's downfall, recounted episode 250:

There remained the virtually insurmountable problem of getting in touch with Chamberlain without Eden's knowledge. After my visit to Downing Street at the end of July, Eden was determined that such a thing should not happen again at any cost, nor would Chamberlain—now weakened—ever have dared to allow Eden to be caught in the midst of a conversation with Italy at Downing Street.

It was Poliakoff who helped me. I told Poliakoff—a hunter of confidential and juicy news—that I had a message for the Prime Minister from the Duce and that I didn't know how to deliver it to him. I asked Poliakoff if he could not, through Lord Tyrrell—a well-known friend of Chamberlain's—let Chamberlain know that I was in possession of this message but that I was physically unable to deliver it to him. Poliakoff rushed over to Tyrrell. Tyrrel rushed to Downing Street, and that same day Poliakoff returned to the Embassy to tell me that at 5:00 p.m. Chamberlain would call me personally. I could hardly believe it. Yet at 5 o'clock sharp, Chamberlain himself asked to speak with me on the phone. He asked me if it were indeed true that I had a message from Mussolini. I replied that it was true and read him over the phone this false message I had fabricated, consisting of three points.

The first was that the Duce interpreted a recent speech by Chamberlain to mean that Chamberlain retained Mussolini's personal confidence.

The second was that the difficulties within the Non-Intervention Committee stemmed from the conduct of Russia and France and from attacks by the British press, but that despite this, Mussolini was determined to work toward the adoption of the British Plan.

The third was that Mussolini was maintaining his offer for a comprehensive agreement with England, both within and outside the Committee.

Chamberlain, still on the phone, expressed his deepest satisfaction to me and instructed me to reply [j/c] to Mussolini's message, dictating to me himself the words that I sent to Rome—without, of course, mentioning that they were a response to a message from the Duce that had never reached me. But in this way, I was able to foster a favorable disposition toward the Duce in Chamberlain and a favorable disposition toward Chamberlain in the Duce; in short, to resume the position I had established at the end of July through the exchange of letters between Chamberlain and Mussolini...

Following this so-called exchange of messages, my contacts with Chamberlain's confidant, Sir Joseph Ball, began. It was after this false exchange of messages that Chamberlain authorized his trusted aide to establish direct contact with me, bypassing Eden. Thus began the collaboration between Ball and me that contributed significantly to bringing about Eden's downfall and to maintaining a discreet and effective line of communication between Chamberlain and me, so that we could each coordinate our respective actions in the best possible way—Chamberlain's actions toward Eden, and my actions toward the Duce and Ciano. I trusted Chamberlain, and Chamberlain trusted me...

Eden did everything in his power within the Non-Intervention Committee during the months of October and November to definitively undermine any possibility of an Italian-British agreement. I continued to give Chamberlain the impression that we were pursuing a conciliatory course, without ever informing Rome of anything, because I was certain that Rome would not have been able to grasp the necessity of this diplomatic effort and would certainly have frozen the situation and prevented me from working. There are almost no dispatches to Rome reporting on my work with Ball. If I had sent them, I was certain they would have stopped me. I preferred to take everything upon myself—the risk and the

responsibility. It was indeed worth it, as events later proved.

For three months, I continued to give Chamberlain the impression that he absolutely had to act courageously; otherwise, Italy would be lost to England forever. Day by day, I explained to Chamberlain the sentiments of the Italian people, who by then considered a conflict with England to be inevitable. I used every means at my disposal to convey this situation to Chamberlain day by day; at the same time, I exaggerated Mussolini's conciliatory tendencies to Chamberlain. These conciliatory tendencies never actually existed, but every time I went to the Non-Intervention Committee, I fabricated—for Chamberlain's benefit—alleged instructions from Rome calling for a conciliatory stance. In truth, the instructions from Rome were sparse and virtually nonexistent. There is only one telegram telling me to intensify the polemic against France and against England—that is, exactly the opposite of what I actually did and, above all, what I led Chamberlain to believe. On the other hand, Chamberlain informed me almost every day of the instructions he was giving to Eden—instructions that Eden, for his part, never followed—which allowed me to assess Eden's preconceived hostility toward Italy and, at the same time, to inform Chamberlain of how his Foreign Minister was disobeying his instructions and directives.

With Chamberlain's confidence thus restored, on January 10, 1938—that is, after Lady Ivy's first meetings in Rome with Ciano—the Italian embassy in London was informed that the prime minister was now willing to begin negotiations with Grandi as soon as possible and in Eden's absence. Grandi was in Rome at that time. Upon his immediate return to London, however, he had not acted on the message,[251] fully aware of the difficulties and risks of such a move with a hostile Eden—who could have triggered a government crisis— a Ciano who would effectively be sidelined as well, and a Mussolini who wanted the agreement but was not truly convinced that concluding it required a willingness to resolve the Spanish issue—and that he could not be exposed to the risk of failure, given that—aside from any other consideration—it would result in Italy's rapid and definitive slide into Hitler's arms. This, most likely, was the origin of Chamberlain's second letter to his sister-in-law—the one Mussolini had seen on February 1. Amid various intermediaries, impatience, the need to buy time, deceptions, misunderstandings, and Machiavellian maneuvering, it is difficult to say how much longer the affair could have dragged on, much less how it might have concluded had it not been for the sudden —as has been noted—concrete threat of an imminent deterioration of the situation in Austria, which brought about a turning point.

On February 4, a whole series of changes had taken place in Germany's highest military and political offices (including the appointment of von Ribbentrop as foreign minister to replace von Neurath) that could have only one interpretation: Hitler had sought to make the Reich's leadership more homogeneous and aligned with his political agenda, removing from it those elements that were less reliable or who, in any case, had until then introduced into German politics strategic approaches or methods that did not fully coincide with his own. Among these changes was also the recall of von Papen from Vienna. On February 12, Hitler summoned Chancellor Schuschnigg to Berchtesgaden; four days later, Schuschnigg was forced to reshuffle his government and appoint the leader of the Austrian Nazis, Seyss-Inquart, as Minister of the Interior. On February 5, a note in the "Diplomatic Information" had expressed the Rome government's approval of the Führer's decisions, which were "particularly fortunate and suited to the needs of the moment," and Mussolini had telegraphed Hitler his satisfaction with Hitler's assumption of effective command of all the armed forces of the Reich 252. However, this initial enthusiasm 253 was soon followed by serious concerns: as early as February 13, Ciano noted in his diary: "The Anschluss is inevitable. We must simply delay it as much as possible" 254. Mussolini, who had previously expressed support for the Nazification of Austria ("What is not complete is not secure: Romania is a lesson") 255, had to change his mind within a few days. Under the date of

February 18, Ciano's diary reads 256:

This morning the Duce was rather irritated with Germany over the way the Austrian issue has been handled. The Germans should have warned us beforehand; instead, not a word. Furthermore, if, instead of stopping at the positions already reached, they were to aim for a full-fledged Anschluss, this would create general conditions entirely different from those under which the Axis was formed, and would require a reassessment of the situation.

Until then, Ciano had spoken of a "totalitarian settlement" of Italian-British relations and had urged the start of the negotiations scheduled for late July, but ultimately he had not fully committed himself to them, nor had he actually done anything to prevent Eden from blocking them. To borrow an apt expression from the French chargé d'affaires in Rome, one might say that after the great scare at Nyon, Mussolini had been driven—by a sort of "spite party" typical of his psychology—to project the image of a Fascist Italy even closer to Nazi Germany. Ciano had probably believed in the Axis and, despite everything, continued to believe in it even more; all things considered, he must have regarded England up to that point as less dangerous and politically influential than Mussolini did. Now, however, faced with the imminent threat of the Anschluss, his attitude changed completely, and on the 16th he rushed to write a letter to Grandi which, beneath an apparently calm tone, was nothing but a cry of alarm and a plea to forge closer ties with England 258:

Dear Dino,

From my telegram of the 15th, you will have noted once again the current state of mind here and the resulting intentions regarding the agreement with London. I would have nothing further to add were it not for the new development that has occurred in the meantime—one which, while not fundamentally altering the situation, nonetheless makes it necessary to adjust our tactics. The new development is the Berchtesgaden Conference, along with its outcome. The Nazification of Austria can now be considered, if not complete, certainly very advanced. This was to be expected. Just as it is now easy to foresee that further advances in the Nazi offensive will occur. When? That is the question, and the answer seems difficult to determine. And it is precisely in light of this uncertainty that the state of Italian-British negotiations must be examined. To use one of the Duce's phrases—as always, highly effective—we now find ourselves in the interval between the fourth and fifth acts of the Austrian affair. When will the fifth act begin? It is impossible to predict. But it cannot be ruled out at all that the pace will accelerate.

This leeway—and only this leeway—can be used in negotiations between us and London. Today, any concessions or compromises are part of the normal give-and-take of diplomacy, and if we begin to negotiate, no one will be able to speak in any way of pressure at the door or of being backed into a corner. But tomorrow, should the Anschluss be a fait accompli, should Greater Germany now loom over our borders with the growing might of its seventy million men, then it would become increasingly difficult for us to conclude an agreement or even to speak with the British, because the world would inevitably interpret our policy of rapprochement with London as a pilgrimage to Canossa under German pressure. Therefore, the time seems to have come to step up the pace toward concluding those negotiations, which so far have proved stagnant and thus fruitless. Let me clarify one point right away: it is not that the Duce is any more eager today than he was yesterday to shake hands with the British. Just as yesterday, he is eager for an agreement, if one is possible; just as yesterday, he is ready to face any trial, even the harshest, if that appears necessary. The outcome of the negotiations may therefore be positive or negative. It is not solely up to us to shoulder such a responsibility: the British must bear their fair share. But there must be a conclusion, and it must come quickly. For if further delays were to arise due to the Byzantine nature of prejudices and preliminary objections, and if, in the meantime, the

Nazi advance in Austria were to reach its final stage and present us with a fait accompli, then there would no longer be any alternative, and we would have to definitively steer our policy toward clear, open, and unchanging hostility toward the Western Powers.

I am informing you of this so that you may act accordingly. I am certain you will find a way to make the British understand—whenever and however you deem it most useful and appropriate—that if we are to make an effort to try to steer the faltering vessel of our relations to safe harbor, we must resolve to do so soon, for time is running out and not all the cards in the game can remain forever solely in our hands and theirs.

The letter, whose arrival had been announced to him in advance from Rome, was in Grandi's hands at nine o'clock in the morning on Friday, February 18. Grandi's diary has preserved for us the reactions it provoked 259:

Alas, alas, what sadness in reading what Ciano writes to me.

It is a letter from people who have truly lost their minds. It is an admission of the failure of the Rome-Berlin Axis policy, and a sort of SOS to London.

Alas. My fate is almost always to think the opposite of what they think in Rome. Now that things are going badly for the Axis, Rome declares itself ready to reach any agreement with London. Woe betide me if I were to follow this tactic. We must give the British, today more than ever, the clear and precise impression that, today more than ever, we are loyal to the Axis, and that—I repeat, that—we are in no hurry to reach an agreement.

It would be disastrous if Eden were to learn the contents of this letter, which, from the British perspective, fully justifies Eden's policy—he maintains that time is working in England's favor against Italy, and that Italy will eventually have to come to terms with London on terms far less favorable than today's. Italy, according to [nc] Eden and Churchill—who do not wish to reach an agreement with us at this time—will eventually have to choose between full subordination to Berlin or full subordination to London.

That is also what Ciano says in his letter. Rome is therefore willing to betray Berlin for London.

Now. No. That is not the line we should take. We must now reap all the benefits from the Rome-Berlin Axis, since we have already borne all the disadvantages with the fall of Austria.

In any case, I will continue these next few days to act like Nelson—ignoring the signal. And I'll press on.

If it goes well, Long live Italy. I'll say, as always, that it was in accordance with their instructions.

If it goes badly, the risk is all mine.

This, I believe, is how one must serve Mussolini and Italy.

Contrary to what he had thought, however, Grandi did not need to play hide-and-seek with the British. The events in Austria had, in fact, had a decisive effect on Chamberlain as well, prompting him to act without delay and, if necessary, even to openly oppose Eden. In the days immediately preceding this,

Eden had repeatedly sought to meet with Grandi. The Italian ambassador, however, had turned down all requests, determined to avoid a meeting that would either lead nowhere or worsen the situation. And he had made this known to Chamberlain through the "secret channel." On the 17th, following a third invitation from Eden, news arrived via Ball that Chamberlain himself would also be attending the meeting on the morning of the 18th.260 This led to Grandi's acceptance. The meeting took place in two sessions—one in the late morning and another in the afternoon—and proved decisive.

Grandi—who reported on the meeting to Ciano the following day in a report running a full fifty pages[261]—had an experience that was entirely unique. Sitting across from him were not the two top leaders of British foreign policy, but two men—by then exasperated by a series of increasingly entrenched differences of opinion—who were pursuing different political agendas and determined to see their own ideas prevail once and for all. It is no coincidence that, in the final pages of his report, Grandi wrote:

Yesterday's discussion was certainly one of the most paradoxical and extraordinary I have ever had the occasion to take part in.

Chamberlain and Eden were not a Prime Minister and a Foreign Secretary discussing a delicate international situation with an ambassador from a foreign country. They were—and revealed themselves to me, outside and above all protocol—two enemies facing one another, like two roosters, in a veritable combat stance. The questions and inquiries posed to me one after another by Chamberlain were all—without exception—intentionally directed at me for the purpose of eliciting specific answers that would serve to refute and dismantle the dialectical and polemical positions upon which Eden had evidently previously built or attempted to justify, against Chamberlain himself and before his Cabinet colleagues, his wretched anti-Italian and anti-fascist policy.

Eden, for his part, showed no restraint in revealing himself fully to me as he has always been—and as I have always described him—an unyielding enemy of Fascism and of Italy.

At the end of these three-hour talks, the two men sitting across from me gave me the indelible impression that, beyond the words, the arguments, the controversies, and the very issues under discussion, they were playing—or at least preparing to play— the high-stakes game of their future fate within the government and the Conservative Party, and were stockpiling their polemical ammunition for the Cabinet meeting taking place at this very moment as I write this report—a meeting that could be a definitive and decisive battle between them.

Since Grandi's report to Ciano is widely known, we will not go into the details of the meeting. For the purposes of our discussion, what matters is the fact that Chamberlain—now determined to pursue the path of an agreement with Rome—raised only two preliminary questions. He wanted to know whether it was true that Italy had "given its prior consent to German and Nazi intervention in Austrian domestic politics and to the consequent gradual absorption of Austria, in exchange for certain specific commitments on the part of Germany to support certain Italian plans in the Mediterranean and in Europe." And—as far as Spain was concerned—whether Italy was willing to declare, within the Non-Intervention Committee, its agreement with the British formula proposed to it by Plymouth and Eden about ten days earlier to resolve the issues of belligerence and the withdrawal of volunteers. Once these two points were clarified, all other issues could be resolved, starting with the recognition of the empire, and negotiations could begin as soon as possible in Rome, where the Italians wanted them to take place. Grandi was able to answer the first question easily: it was false that a secret agreement regarding the Anschluss existed between Rome and Berlin. It was much more difficult for him to answer the

second. Although Ciano had not mentioned Spain at all in his latest letter, Grandi knew full well that in Rome—now that the fear of a conflict had passed—they would never decide, and certainly not at that moment and under those circumstances, to withdraw from Spain before Franco's victory. He therefore limited himself to saying that he did not know what Mussolini and Ciano thought of the proposal and that, consequently, he could not make any definitive commitment. Then—as the prime minister insisted on receiving a positive response by the following Monday, "before he himself gave a definitive acceptance of this draft agreement" after submitting it to the cabinet for approval—he had, just in case (that is, as he would write to Ciano, "in order to give 'weight' to a possible Italian acceptance of the British proposal"), he had gone at length into a "personal" critique of the proposal in question.

Aside from this unresolved issue, by the end of the second phase of the meeting, the launch of negotiations had, in principle, been approved. All that was needed to make it effective was approval by the British Cabinet. There, the following day, the clash between Chamberlain and Eden (which had already erupted during the break between the two phases of the meeting with Grandi263) was extremely bitter. Eden explicitly stated that if the proposal were approved, he would resign. Since a compromise proposal put forward by Halifax proved fruitless, the meeting was adjourned until the following afternoon 264. That evening, Chamberlain informed Grandi that, in order to "win tomorrow's battle," he needed Italy's acceptance of the Plymouth-Eden proposal regarding the issues of belligerence and volunteers. That afternoon, Grandi had spoken by telephone with Ciano. Ciano had initially told him that "perhaps" they could accept it. Then, in response to Grandi's insistence on being authorized to formally accept it, he told him to wait until Monday. He had given as justification that he was in Rome alone. The "Duce" was not there: "we must wait." And he had suggested that Grandi make use, in the meantime, of the "good impression" made on Rome... 265. Adhering to such a course of action would almost certainly have meant derailing everything—the agreement and the Chamberlain government—with the added prospect that it would be succeeded by another government more or less aligned with Eden's positions. Making a decision was not easy, but the next day Grandi set out to make one. Here is how his diary has preserved for us the account of that day and the following night, as well as the political and personal reflections (far from irrelevant for understanding the relationship between Ciano and Grandi and the personalities of the two) that it gradually prompted in him 266:

We have reached a truly dramatic phase in the situation.

Let them say and think whatever they want in Rome. At 2:00 p.m., I'm sending Fracassi to Ball to inform him—with a request that he immediately relay this to Chamberlain—that I have received instructions from Rome that Italy accepts the formula proposed by Chamberlain on Friday. It's not true that I've received these instructions, but I'm doing it anyway.

We must do this. On the other hand, the risk is small. But we must act immediately. Eden has once again threatened to resign. We have reached the climax. Tonight, it's make or break.

At 6:00 p.m., I inform Ciano that I have accepted the proposal, and that this has in fact been of enormous benefit to Chamberlain at the Cabinet meeting.

Chamberlain sends his thanks for the prompt notification.

London is experiencing a tense, electric atmosphere.

At 8:00 p.m., Eden's resignation is officially announced.

Alalà—Long live Italy!

I inform Ciano, who is having dinner at Princess Colonna’s home.

An unforgettable night. At the Embassy, we’re all beside ourselves with joy.

Italy’s bitterest enemy is thus gone—he’s gone.

Starting today, a new chapter in the history of Italian-British relations truly begins.

Eden will wage a major battle in the House of Commons tomorrow.

Churchill is trying to stir up the Conservatives.

The Labor Party is stirring up the crowds.

The final word has not yet been spoken.

Tomorrow will be an extremely difficult day for Chamberlain. We must support him all the way.

Some say that by tomorrow evening we’ll have a left-wing government led by Eden.

Maybe so. But I don’t think so.

Chamberlain is tough.

Today is the day of reckoning. Who could ever take away my joy from these fantastic days?

I know I’ll have to pay the price. In Rome right now, they’re doing everything they can to downplay my success—the role I played in this battle.

Have I perhaps forgotten the bitter months that followed the victorious end of the sanctions?

Have I forgotten the bitter weeks following the end of the gentlemen’s agreement?

No. Rome will make me pay dearly for this, too. I'm sure of it. It's always done so.

I call Rome every hour.

Just yesterday—see Ciano’s letter—after the Nazi coup in Austria, they’d lost their minds in Rome.

Last night they couldn’t believe what was happening was real.

Now that we’ve won, everything in Rome seems like the most natural thing in the world.

Ciano called me today with such a different tone of voice.

On Thursday and Friday, three times in a row over the phone, he told me that I had to act, act, act—because if we don’t succeed now, we’re doomed. His voice was anxious, restless. It was the voice of a

man who was clearly saying: we're in your hands.

Today, now that we've succeeded, now that we've won, his voice is that of a man who wants me to understand that he's the one who did it all.

He even had the audacity to tell me that he knew everything from Lady Chamberlain, a poor, kind, foolish woman who is in Rome.

It will end up looking as though the ones who did everything these past few days were Ciano and Lady Chamberlain, from Rome and in the salons of Rome.

Ciano even had the bad taste to tell me this already, in no uncertain terms, over the phone. He wants me to call, not to write. My reports or telegrams these days are not welcome. They don't want any documents that might "get in their way" of writing history on their own terms.

It is all too clear.

On the 21st, after the fact, Ciano reportedly told Grandi over the phone, "How and why this formulation? We'll discuss it later." 267. In reality, British sources suggest that if Chamberlain prevailed over Eden—to the point that Eden resigned from the government (Halifax was called in to replace him)—and the House of Commons approved the prime minister's policy, this was due in large part precisely to Italy's timely "acceptance" of the British proposal regarding Spain. Likewise, the subsequent course of the negotiations and, above all, the events that followed—between the signing of the "Easter Agreements" and their entry into force—in Italian-British relations clearly show that it was precisely Rome's ambiguous stance on the Spanish question that strained those relations and effectively stripped the long-awaited general agreement of all its practical value.

The events surrounding the negotiations in Rome are well known.[268] Once the crisis was resolved, Chamberlain immediately initiated them. On March 8, the British ambassador to Rome, Perth, and Ciano held the first of fifteen meetings through which the agreement would take shape. Between the first and second meetings, on March 11, the Anschluss took place; however, it had no negative impact on the negotiations, even though—as we shall see in the next chapter—Mussolini did not react to it in the slightest and dismissed a French proposal for a tripartite "consultation" in the spirit of Stresa 269. The British intention to reach a positive conclusion to the negotiations quickly was immediately evident. The preliminary issue for the Italians—that of de jure recognition of the empire—was immediately raised by London in Geneva to make such recognition possible once the League of Nations—upon a British proposal—had favorably resolved the issue of recognizing Italian sovereignty

M7 Ibid., February 21, 1938.

269 The Grand Council, in session since the 10th, approved on March 12 a resolution on the events in Austria that was entirely in line with the government's official position. It is, however, highly significant that this was immediately followed by a resolution expressing the hope that the ongoing talks between Ciano and Perth would lead "to the conclusion of an agreement in accordance with the interests of both countries and such as to eliminate any cause of conflict between them" (PNF, The Grand Council of Fascism, etc., op. cit., pp. 640 ff.).

Regarding Ethiopia. On "minor" issues, either an agreement was reached easily or an appropriate diplomatic formula was found to resolve them in the least unsatisfactory manner possible, entrusting

their concrete resolution to the overall effects the agreement would have and to the goodwill of the parties to make it truly effective. That said, it must also be noted that, as far as Italy is concerned, Pastorelli is correct in stating that the agreement was “largely satisfactory in the Africa-Red Sea-Arabia sector” and that, even if not all the desired objectives were achieved, “the compromises, accepted above all due to the urgency with which the final phase of the negotiations [took place], [were] nonetheless inspired by the principle of the equal standing of the two contracting parties” 270. On several occasions, the British—partly to reassure Paris, where the opening of negotiations had generally caused alarm and concern, to say the least, and partly because of the objective importance the matter would have—tried to involve France in the negotiations in some way, but always to no avail, as the Italians dug in behind the twofold response that they did not favor multilateral agreements and were willing to consider the possibility of a bilateral agreement with France at a later date. Faced with this firm stance, London eventually abandoned its attempts. The British request to reduce Italian forces in Libya, however, met with no resistance: on March 27, Ciano informed Perth that they would be reduced by roughly half, with withdrawals beginning immediately at a rate of one thousand men per week. Likewise, Rome immediately proceeded to tone down the rhetoric and content of Radio Bari’s propaganda somewhat.

The only real sticking point in the negotiations was the withdrawal of the “volunteers” from Spain. Chamberlain was well aware of the difficulties that resolving this issue posed for Italy and, realistically, did not consider “Italy’s withdrawal from Spain—regardless of what other countries might do—to be a sine qua non condition for an agreement”271, but he could not accept Ciano’s evasions on this matter either, since failing to find a solution to the issue would make it difficult both to secure parliamentary approval of the agreements and to maintain Britain’s position within the League of Nations—not to mention the repercussions this would have on the question of recognition of the empire. In the end, the problem was resolved through an exchange of notes attached to the text of the agreement. In the first note, Italy gave its “full endorsement” to the British formula for the proportional evacuation of foreign volunteers and undertook “to carry out this evacuation in practice and in earnest at the time and under the conditions to be determined by the Non-Intervention Committee on the basis of the aforementioned formula” and, in any case, to immediately withdraw its volunteers from Spanish territory “as soon as the civil war ends.” In the same note, Italy also reaffirmed that it had “no territorial or political aims,” that it sought “no privileged economic position in metropolitan Spain, the Balearic Islands, any of the Spanish overseas possessions, or the Spanish zone of Morocco,” and that it had “no intention of maintaining any armed forces in any of the aforementioned territories.” In the second note, England expressed its satisfaction with the Italian note, stated that it regarded “a resolution of the Spanish question as a prerequisite for the entry into force of the Agreement,” and, in turn, informed Italy that the British government, “desiring that those obstacles which may currently be maintained to impede the freedom of Member States regarding the recognition of Italian sovereignty over Ethiopia be removed, intended to take steps at the next meeting of the Council of the League of Nations, with the aim of clarifying the position of Member States in this regard.” The solution thus devised served to resolve, by linking them, the two preliminary issues of concern to Rome and London and made it possible to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion and to proceed, on April 16, 1938, at Palazzo Chigi, to the signing of the relevant protocols and their numerous annexes 272. The consequence, however, was that the agreement would enter into force only when the two governments jointly decided to do so—that is, when the two preconditions had been met.

With a good dose of his usual exaggeration and flippancy, on April 14, Ciano noted 273:

The Duce was pleased. Today truly marks the end of the Ethiopian campaign, and it ends with an imperial agreement, due above all to the steely intransigence of a man who believed and acted alone,

against the whole world, and often against many of his own.

In reality, the “Easter Agreements,” while they brought some short-term advantages to Fascist policy and met with broad and telling approval among the Italian public (as Perth noted when describing the signing ceremony in London and the attitude of the people gathered for the occasion outside Palazzo Chigi: “judging by the general appearance of the crowd and the absence of Blackshirts... this demonstration was completely spontaneous, a rare occurrence in the annals of Fascist Italy” 274), would prove essentially fruitless in the long run, despite having, as Grandi had hoped276, all the elements necessary to usher in a new chapter in the history of Italian-British relations. In the next chapter, we will examine the reasons why they proved fruitless. However, it is worth mentioning one of them here. Signed in mid-April 1938, the “Easter Agreements” entered into force on November 16, seven months later. This was too long a period for their value not to have been significantly eroded in the meantime, given such a dramatic and rapidly changing international situation, to the point that their entry into force went almost unnoticed and occurred, as we shall see, more as a result of the new situation brought about by the Munich Agreement than because of their intrinsic strength. Yet during those seven months, both Rome and London had desired their entry into force and had even requested it. On the Italian side, pressure in this direction had begun as early as the beginning of June, as soon as the League of Nations had resolved the issue of sovereignty over Ethiopia in Italy’s favor and de jure recognition of the empire had thus become possible for England 277. What made this impossible, as usual, was the Spanish question—the inability of Mussolini and Ciano to extricate themselves from the Spanish quicksand even when Franco’s victory was already a foregone conclusion. The accounts of the discussions Ciano had on this matter with Ambassador Perth 278 are extremely revealing; even more so, however, is the account of another discussion on the same issue that the Italian chargé d’affaires in London, Crolla, had with Chamberlain on August 3 279. It shows, in fact, beyond any doubt that the British prime minister was so understanding and willing to accommodate Italian demands that he went so far as to say he was ready to settle for “anything at all,” for “a reasonable pretext” to declare that Spain no longer posed a threat to European peace and thus bring the “Easter Agreements” into effect. “I’ll tell you, for example,” he said to Crolla, “that I would even be willing to consider a partial or ‘substantial’ withdrawal of volunteers sufficient.” And, at the request of the Italian chargé d’affaires, he clarified: “I mean a ‘substantial’ withdrawal—that is, not a total one—even without the need for an armistice.”

275 As early as July 13, 1938, in one of his customary informational telegrams to the king regarding the domestic and international situation, Mussolini, referring to the “Easter Agreements,” described them as “in a state of limbo” and added, “We will discuss this again once the Spanish question has been settled,” Mussolini, XLIII, pp. 6 ff.

276 As he had foreseen, Grandi was carefully kept out of the negotiations by Ciano, and when the agreement was concluded, the regime’s propaganda apparatus (continuing a campaign that had already begun in February) did everything possible to avoid associating his name with it. The British attitude was quite different. Chamberlain, in the House of Commons, explicitly acknowledged the decisive role played by Grandi and repeated the same points in a personal letter written to him on May 3, 1938. Grandi’s diary contains several outbursts regarding this stark contrast in attitude toward him.

In short, even when they were offered every possible means to do so, Mussolini and Ciano were unable to muster the moral courage—which at this point was all that was required, given that there was no longer any doubt about Franco’s victory—to extricate themselves from the Spanish quicksand. Despite the gravity of the international situation, after Chamberlain’s speech to Crolla, it still took Rome

another two months to “negotiate” with Franco the withdrawal (beginning on October 16) of a first “substantial” contingent of “volunteers.”

Very often, when discussing the Fascist intervention in Spain, historians have emphasized the human cost—3,819 dead (of whom 2,042 were members of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and 1,777 were members of the Militia) and 12,000 wounded, 280 of whom were non-combatants—and the material losses (759 aircraft, 1,801 cannons, 1,426 mortars, 3,436 machine guns, 157 light tanks, 6,791 motor vehicles, etc.) and in money (a total of approximately eight and a half billion281). At times, their attention has also focused on the very strong influence it had on the shift in attitude toward fascism among broad sectors of French, British, and American public opinion—which until then had regarded it as “an acceptable solution to Italy’s problems”—and which, as a result, began to view it increasingly as a threat to peace and democracy and to identify it outright with Nazism, from which they had previously distinguished it. Much less often—due above all to the optical distortion caused by the conditioning of fascist politics’ final developments, which led most people to consider that policy, even at this early stage, as having already been defined in terms of a clear alignment with Germany—has attention been paid to assessing the importance that Italian intervention and, even more so, the ever-increasing involvement of Ciano and Mussolini himself (even though, as we have seen, the two positions are not, in our view, comparable) played in stripping fascist politics of much of the agility, unscrupulousness, and autonomy in its maneuvers that it had, in theory, sought to possess, and in giving the intervention in Spain itself a meaning different from the one it had initially held for Mussolini. Yet, historically, this was the most important significance for Mussolini and for fascism—the most far-reaching consequence of the entire Spanish affair. Even though it was sought frantically once it became clear that Hitler had by then decided to carry out the Anschluss in the near future and that it was impossible to stop him, the general agreement with England—which took shape in the “Easter Agreements”—had been conceived within this logic of agility, flexibility of action, and autonomy (which, in turn, was nothing other than a re-enactment and continuation of the logic of “decisive influence”). With his inability to extricate himself—even at the eleventh hour—from the Spanish quicksand, for fear of giving the impression that he was breaking his word merely to please England and, therefore, of needing or even fearing it, it was essentially Mussolini himself who threw his own policy into crisis or, at the very least, to significantly clip its wings, when Italy’s “decisive influence” was still a reality (or, if you will, an appearance—but in such situations, appearance is almost always more important than reality) and Mussolini was—whatever may be said in hindsight—too useful in the eyes of so much of the Western political establishment for them to consider it impossible to come to an agreement with him. The fact that the “Duce” did not realize this or, worse, was unable to face the risk of a momentary loss of prestige and the inevitable resulting controversies must be viewed and explained—like any historical reality—by taking into account a multitude of factors. We have discussed these in this and the previous chapter. Nevertheless, the fact must also, to some extent, be viewed from the perspective of Mussolini’s political realism, and from this particular perspective, one must conclude that even Mussolini’s political realism, when confronted with the myth, began to show weaknesses and limitations that cannot be underestimated if one truly wishes to understand Mussolini’s persona and politics during this period and their impact on the reality of the regime.

280 The total number of Italian “volunteers” in Spain was just under 80,000, of whom about 30,000 were members of the Militia. The volunteers serving in the Republican ranks—and in particular in the International Brigades—totaled about 40,000, hailing from fifty-three countries: 8,500 French, 5,000 Germans, 4,500 Poles, 4,109 Italians, 3,000 Americans, 2,500 British, 2,000 Czechoslovaks, 1,600 Yugoslavs, 1,200 Hungarians, 850 Cubans, 600 Austrians, 500 Argentines, 500 Romanians, 500 Swedes, 450 Bulgarians, 400 Norwegians, 350 Finns, 200 Estonians, 142 Lithuanians, 127 Irish, no Latvians, etc. From the USSR, over 2,000 Soviets went to Spain (including 772 airmen, 359 tank crew

members, and 491 technicians), as well as 589 political émigrés from various countries.

281 In May 1940, following lengthy negotiations that began in mid-1938, an agreement was reached between the Italian and Spanish governments under which Spain undertook to repay Italy 5 billion for the expenses it had incurred during the Civil War to aid the Nationalists.

Chapter Five

From the Axis to the “Pact of Steel”: A Path of Fears and Uncertainties

The Anschluss was a bitter blow for Mussolini. Although he was deeply convinced that it was virtually inevitable and that, barring unforeseeable events, he could do nothing to prevent it, the “Duce” had not fully resigned himself to this idea;1 he must have harbored hope until the very end that it could be averted and, above all, must have deluded himself into believing that, in any case, it would not happen so soon. If he truly had to endure it, he needed the time necessary to first conclude the agreement with England and to prepare the Italian people for it, convincing them to accept two ideas: that, in the new reality shaped by the Axis, Austria’s independence was no longer indispensable for Italy, and that the Axis did not pose a danger but, on the contrary, strengthened Italy’s position, enable a “realistic” agreement with England and subsequently with France as well, and put Italy in a position to champion a new “four-power pact” that would ensure a long period of peace for Europe—though achieving this would require certain “inevitable adjustments” to the post-Versailles order, including, precisely, the Anschluss.

As for France, Mussolini was—as has been noted—less receptive than he was toward England. For the time being, however, he did not rule out a period of rapprochement at all, even though in his plans this was to take place after the rapprochement with London, independently of it, and

1 According to a report dated January 20, 1938, from Paris by the French chargé d’affaires in Rome, Blondel, Mussolini was, deep down, opposed to the Anschluss; however, he would not have done anything to prevent it, but would have sought to obtain, in exchange, effective support for achieving his hegemonic objectives in the Mediterranean and, in particular, in Africa. Precisely for this reason, Hitler —who wanted to avoid antagonizing France and perhaps England—had until then respected the status quo in Austria. According to Blondel, Ciano was probably less hostile to the Anschluss, both because he was primarily concerned with the interests of Italian-German collaboration and was inclined to “cut his losses” and adopt—even in foreign policy—the totalitarian concepts that Mussolini more readily reserved for domestic policy, and because he underestimated the danger posed by the German presence on the border. “The northern border,” he reportedly said, “is not a river”; “it is an impenetrable barrier of ice eight months a year and of steep cliffs the rest of the time”—and therefore easily defensible. DDF, vol. II, VIII, pp. 28 ff., as well as (ibid., pp. 72 ff.) what the ambassador to the Holy See, Charles-Roux, reported five days later regarding what Pompeo Aloisi had confided to one of his associates.

to initiative of Paris. The France, like Mussolini said to the new German German to Rome von Mackensen when he received the first time2, he couldn’t think of make contact with Rome “to the staircase of service,” via London. He was supposed to go step her and under circumstances to her least conditions, under the threat from Germany, after having defeated defeated in Spain and after England England had had pulled ahead from her in political toward Italy. Meanwhile, it is difficult to believe that on this "willingness" Mussolinian had some influence - as he thought the French French was thinking Rome Blondel3 - the "old intellectual intellectual and emotions” of the "leader" toward toward

France, easy it is toward opposite to understand the reasons political behind underlying, especially if one consider that the ultimate ultimate of its strategy for the immediate future was, in fact, the conclusion of a new “pact to four-party» of which includes in addition to in being the “brake” and the “guardian” to at at of Germany (just as England it would be should have be from France), would should constitute the element linking linking and of balance. Relatively easy, after that we we’ve said, it’s to understand also why Mussolini believed that the reconciliation with Paris were to take place after that with London and if it were less urgent. In fact, in addition to certain more strictly political considerations, various other factors—rooted in the depths of his psychology and ideology—contributed to this belief. Among the political considerations, the most important were: the lesser danger of a Franco-German agreement at Italy’s expense compared to the one—realistically less improbable—between Germany and England; the far greater difficulty of reaching an agreement with Paris than with London, both due to the greater complexity and gravity of the dispute and, above all, because it was harder to find common ground with France—which was far more committed psychologically, ideologically, and politically than England to supporting Republican Spain and was anything but favorable toward or resigned to a Nationalist victory—and, and thus, to the continued presence of Italian “volunteers” in Spain; the hope that, by attributing to French “intransigence” the responsibility for the failure to quickly resolve the Spanish question and for the persistence of Italian-French tensions, it would be possible to drive a wedge between London and Paris and perhaps divide them; the ideological and political difficulty of justifying a rapprochement with France, governed by the Popular Front, which was bound by a pact of friendship and cooperation with the USSR and on whose territory the most active segment of Italian anti-fascism was concentrated—and this, moreover, at a time when the Popular Front was in trouble and it could not be ruled out that it might plunge into crisis at any moment. It was here that political considerations became intertwined and merged with ideological ones. For Mussolini, the possibility that the Popular Front might lose power was not, in fact, a given that stemmed directly from the democratic nature of the French political system. In his ideological view, the Popular Front was one of the manifestations of the profound crisis—moral and civil even before political—that was gripping and progressively wearing down France, and in which the most glaring and indisputable aspect was the continuous demographic decline with its associated consequences: the crisis of the family, the “blackening” of the population, urbanization, and so on. All of this, combined with the bitterness of the social and political struggles that accompanied the Popular Front’s tenure, led him to believe not only that its days were numbered,[4] but that its failure was the most evident confirmation of the crisis facing French society as a whole. And here too, with all the related implications that his particular ideological vision led him to attribute to this crisis: the unstoppable decline of French power—and in particular, its ability to maintain control over its empire and its international political system for much longer—and the imminent transformation of its domestic political structure at the hands of “new forces,” destined to seize power sooner or later.[5] All these considerations led Mussolini to believe it was more prudent to postpone a rapprochement with Paris. Nor, finally, should we underestimate the considerations we have described as psychological in nature: the resentment that Mussolini (and with him certain sectors of fascism) harbored toward France for the “betrayal” of 1935 and, even more so, toward the French press, which he blamed for the failure of the Laval-Hoare plan and to which he could not forgive the constant attacks (which were no longer limited to the left-wing press but were also becoming increasingly frequent in the traditional right-wing press) against Italy, fascism, his person, and—something that infuriated him even more—the valor of Italian soldiers. Faced with these attacks, the “Duce’s” reaction—and, following his lead, that of many of the top leaders in Fascist politics and especially in the Fascist press—was so disproportionate and absurd that it caused him to lose all sense of proportion, completely set aside his realism, and make him resemble a child reduced by his own powerlessness to resort to the most ridiculous acts of spite. A small example may be more effective than any speech. On October 24, 1938, Radio Parigi Mondiale broadcast the news that, for the first time since Fascism had come to power, a Fascist plot against the

“Duce’s” life had been uncovered. Upon learning of the broadcast, the Minister of Popular Culture, D. Alfieri, immediately contacted Ciano, and in a move typical of Mussolini, the two decided not on a denial but on a “radio retaliation”—that is, the dissemination of a series of false reports concerning France, including one claiming that former President L. Blum and CGT General Secretary L. Jouhaux had been indicted for their involvement in a sordid scandal that had occurred shortly before in Marseille, in which the suspects—including a number of police officials—were accused of the most despicable crimes: white slavery, drug trafficking, fraud, etc...6.

4 Typical in this regard is the “underlying tone” of the calm and by no means polemical remarks on Italian-French relations made by Mussolini as late as November 29, 1938, during the inaugural audience granted to Ambassador François-Poncet: On several occasions, the “Duce” steered the conversation—directly or indirectly—toward the social crisis and the unrest that were plaguing France at that time, clearly revealing his conviction that until this crisis had been “overcome,” relations between the two countries would not return to normal. DDF, vol. II, XII, pp. 843 ff.

5 The hope placed in the French “new forces”—and, within that sphere, in fascist-style political formations such as J. Doriot’s Parti populaire français (see D. Wolf, *Doriot: Du communisme à la collaboration*, Paris 1969)—was shared not only by Mussolini but also by Ciano. See J. Carcopino, *Souvenirs de sept ans 1937–1944*, Paris 1933, p. 31.

Given these circumstances and the widespread hostility in France toward any concession to Italy and Mussolini, the chances of a rapprochement were extremely slim. Yet immediately after the Anschluss, there was for a time more than one opportunity to normalize relations between the two countries to some extent.

Despite the panic—as we have seen—caused at Palazzo Venezia and Palazzo Chigi by its first signs in February, the Anschluss took Mussolini and Ciano by surprise. Hitler, having been informed by the Prince of Hesse that Rome was dissatisfied with how he had handled matters up to that point and that—even though it officially claimed to agree in recognizing the “very significant” step forward made by Germany “in increasing its influence in Austria”— —he deemed it necessary to issue a statement confirming “that Austria continues to exist as an independent state”[7], he was careful not to warn them in advance of what he was preparing. Only when his troops were about to cross the Austrian border on March 11 did he write a letter to Mussolini, which the Prince of Hesse delivered to him that same day. The letter recounted the recent events between Germany and Austria from the German perspective, with a

7 See *Europe on the Brink of Catastrophe*, op. cit., pp. 247 ff. According to information gathered by the French embassy to the Holy See—which cited Count Della Torre as its source—on March 9, faced with the sudden deterioration of the Austrian situation and Hitler’s behavior toward him, Mussolini was “beside himself.” DDF, Series II, VIII, pp. 683 ff.

mention, among other things, of Czechoslovakia—which left little room for illusions regarding Hitler’s intentions toward that country as well (so much so that, when the Italian side requested authorization to publish the letter, Hitler demanded its suppression[8])—he explained the reasons for the decision taken and concluded with a formal declaration of respect for the inviolability of the Brenner border:

There is one thing I now wish to solemnly assure you, Your Excellency, as the Duce of Fascist Italy:

1) Let this act be seen as nothing other than an act of legitimate national defense and, therefore, an action that any man of character in my position would carry out in the same manner. You, too, Your Excellency, could not act otherwise if the fate of Italians were at stake. And I, as Führer and as a National Socialist, cannot do otherwise.

2) At a critical hour for Italy, I have demonstrated to you the firmness of my inner resolve. Have no doubt that, even in the future, nothing will change in this regard.

3) Whatever the outcome of upcoming events may be, I have drawn a clear German border with France, and I now draw an equally clear one with Italy. It is the Brenner Pass.

This decision will never be discussed or challenged. I did not make this decision in 1938 but immediately after the end of the Great War, and I have never made a secret of it.

Given how things had turned out, Mussolini's only "achievement" was this declaration; so it is no wonder that he was said to be "pleased" with it,[9] even though it was evident that it was certainly not enough to make the setback he had suffered any less serious in any respect, much less dismissible with a quip like the one reported by Ciano,[10] that the Anschluss had "removed an ambiguity from the European map" and that others still had to be removed: Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and Belgium. This was all the more true given that, while Hitler—in his letter and then in the Reichstag a week later—pledged to consider the Brenner border non-negotiable, one of the very first consequences of the Anschluss had been the rekindling, both in Austria and in South Tyrol, of hopes for an imminent "liberation of our South Tyrolean brothers." Moreover, the best proof of just how little Mussolini actually trusted Hitler's declarations is the fact that, as we have already noted, it was precisely after those declarations that he made the decision to "seal off" the border with Germany and to "partially seal off" the one with Yugoslavia.

As Hitler had anticipated, there was no negative reaction from the Italian side. In response to French overtures for a three-way review of the situation in the spirit of Stresa, Palazzo Chigi replied that there was nothing to be agreed upon among Italy, England, and France regarding Austria, and the Prince of Hesse, the bearer of Hitler's letter, was told that Italy was following events "with absolute calm." On March 12, the Grand Council approved a declaration, prepared by Mussolini and Ciano, which, after placing all responsibility on Schuschnigg and taking note "with the deepest interest" of Hitler's letter, defined "what has occurred in Austria as the result of a pre-existing state of affairs and the open expression of the sentiments and will of the Austrian people" and endorsed the rejection of the French proposal, "which, being baseless and aimless, would have served only to complicate the international situation."[11] Four days later, Mussolini personally addressed the Austrian question in the Chamber of Deputies with a speech that, given the circumstances, was quite skillful and struck a moderate and reassuring tone.[2] To briefly recap the events, the speech[13] essentially focused on three points. The first addressed the reasons for Italy's passivity:

To the more or less official circles across the Alps that ask us why we did not intervene to "save" Austria's independence, we reply that we had never made any such commitment—neither direct nor indirect, neither written nor verbal. The Austrians, it must be said, have always had the understandable discretion not to ask us for forceful action to defend Austria's independence, because we would have replied that an independence which requires foreign military aid—even against the majority of its own people—is no longer such. Anyone familiar with the Austrians knows that the first resistance to our intervention would have come from them.

Italy did have an interest in the independence of the Austrian federal state; but this was clearly based on the assumption that the Austrians—at least the majority of them—wanted such independence; yet what is happening these days in Austrian territories has shown that the people's deepest yearning was for the Anschluss. To the remaining adherents of a perverse form of Machiavellianism—which we reject—it may be observed that, when an event is inevitable, it is better that it happen with you than in spite of you, or, worse still, against you. In reality, what is taking place is a national revolution, and we Italians are best placed to understand it in terms of its historical necessities and also its methods, which may seem hasty, just as those of all revolutions have always been.

11 See PNF, *Il Gran Consiglio del Fascismo*, etc., op. cit., pp. 640 ff. It was after this declaration that Hitler sent the "Duce" his famous telegram: "Mussolini, I will never forget this!" to which Mussolini replied: "My stance is determined by the friendship between our two countries enshrined in the Axis" (Mussolini, XXIX, p. 459).

The second was intended to dispel the fears aroused by the German presence on the Italian border:

There are individuals in the world so superficial, so blissfully ignorant of the conditions in Fascist Italy, that they believe they can intimidate us with the sheer number of millions of Germans and their presence on our borders.

First of all, Italy—this Italy—is not easily intimidated. Fifty-two states failed to do so during the war in Africa. Italy has a single will, a tough spirit, and marches straight ahead.

We are so unimpressed that we calmly admit that in a few years, due solely to natural population growth, while we will number fifty million, the Germans will number eighty million—but not along a single border, but along ten borders, among which the Italian border is the border between two friendly peoples: an inviolable border.

The third, finally, aimed at reaffirming the full validity of the Axis, put to the test and "proven" by the Anschluss:

When the Austrian drama reached its fifth act in recent days, the global opponents of fascism watched to see if the right opportunity had finally arrived to pit the two totalitarian regimes against one another and shatter their solidarity through a clash that would be—among other things, as we say to the professional pacifists—the prelude to a new world war...

But why not say it? Millions of Germans, too, were listening. The hour had come for what might be called the "test" of the Axis. Now the Germans know that the Axis is not merely a diplomatic construct effective only under normal circumstances, but has proven itself solid above all in this exceptional hour in the history of the Germanic world and of Europe.

The two nations, whose path toward unity has been parallel in both timing and method—and which are united by a similar conception of the politics of life—can march together to give our troubled continent a new balance, one that will finally allow for the peaceful and fruitful collaboration of all peoples.

Closely linked to the Anschluss, even if it was not explicitly mentioned, was, finally, the speech that Mussolini delivered in the Senate two weeks later on the budget estimates for the military ministries (the one following which Operation Primo Maresciallato was launched). It had been thirteen years, since 1925, since the "Duce" had addressed military issues in parliament. It is difficult not to conclude

that, by returning to address these issues personally at that moment—and by asserting that, all things considered, much had been accomplished in terms of military preparedness and that the rest "we will accomplish at any cost," and that he devoted the greater part of his day to military matters[14]—Mussolini's intention was to once again seek to reassure those who viewed the Anschluss as a direct threat to Italy's territorial integrity.

On the domestic front, however, these statements and the massive effort carried out along these lines by all the tools at the regime's disposal to "guide" public opinion failed to mitigate the entirely negative reactions and concerns that the Anschluss had provoked (the prefects' reports are eloquent and unanimous on this point) in very broad sectors of the country, among ordinary citizens as well as among Fascists—and not only among the elderly, but also among the young (at the University of Rome, a foreign policy conference at which V. Gayda spoke, as part of the pre-Littoriali events, V. Gayda was speaking as part of the pre-Littoriali events was transformed by a group of young anti-fascists into an anti-German demonstration involving most of the Gufini present[15]), among the regime's elite, and even among members of the Grand Council, where Balbo had harshly criticized the Germans and even expressed fears for the future of Trieste—and it seems Bottailó had also voiced some criticism. To the point that it is no exaggeration to say that, domestically, the Anschluss was perceived by many as the first real defeat of fascism and constituted for many others such a serious event that it led them to view Axis policy with ever-increasing concern and often hostility. Nor should this come as a surprise when one considers the limited sympathy that Nazi Germany (despite its extensive efforts to infiltrate Italy and the relentless propaganda campaign waged by the regime in favor of the Axis over the past year and a half) enjoyed overall in Italy, the still-vivid anti-German animosity from the years of the 1914–18 war (not to mention the Risorgimento tradition, which was also still alive and active in large parts of the country), the no less vivid memory of the events of 1934 and the very different position Mussolini had taken at that time regarding Austrian independence, and, finally, the fear—more or less clearly perceived by many—that the Anschluss was merely the first (or a new one, depending on how Italy's intervention in Spain was judged) step down a path that could prove very dangerous—and down which Italy risked being dragged by Germany against its own interests and aspirations.

On the diplomatic front, the effect of these statements was, all things considered, more positive. That Mussolini would not oppose the Anschluss had been virtually a foregone conclusion from the start. Nevertheless, in London and especially in Paris, for several weeks there was anxious speculation about what the Italian reaction to the Anschluss would be. It is certainly not without significance that on March 12, the French chargé d'affaires in Rome, in general

16 For Balbo, see G. Ciano, Diario, op. cit., p. 111; for Bottai, see DDF, Series II, Vol. VIII, pp. 902 ff., where it is stated that Mussolini, too, had used "assez désobligeant" language toward the Germans.

rather sparing with suggestions, had hastened to advise Delbos to try to avoid as much as possible—given Mussolini's "extreme sensitivity" and impulsive nature—that the French press attack Italy's conduct,7. Since it was fairly well established that Mussolini had not wanted but had endured the Anschluss and that he would seek retribution, the question—especially in Paris—was whether his reaction would be to accelerate the rapprochement with England and extend it to France as well, or whether, on the contrary, he would further strengthen relations with Germany, giving them (as was also feared in the Vatican[18]) the character of a military alliance.

The outlook following the Austrian crisis left no doubt (Chamberlain's speech to the House of Commons on March 24 is clear) about Hitler's intentions to address the Sudetenland issue in the near future as well. In these circumstances, even though it was clear that a more precise understanding of

Rome's intentions would have to wait until Hitler's trip to Italy in early May—a return visit following Mussolini's trip to Germany the previous year—in Paris (where Paul-Boncourt, the man responsible for France's accession to the "Four-Power Pact")—in early April, serious consideration began to be given to "the necessity of reestablishing contact with Rome." However, this was easier said than done, especially because—assuming Italian willingness—Mussolini and Ciano would certainly have demanded that the negotiations take place (just as those with the British had) in Rome, where France had only a chargé d'affaires; accrediting a new ambassador would have meant recognizing the Empire a priori, something Paris could not afford at that moment, since even London had not done so—though London had not encountered this obstacle on the path to negotiations with Rome, having had the foresight not to recall its accredited ambassador from the Italian capital before the question of the Empire arose. This led to an initial French probe, conducted through Senator Puricelli, president of the Milan Fair, to try to understand Italian intentions and determine whether, if necessary, the negotiations could be conducted by an ad hoc negotiator, who would be granted the rank of ambassador only after their successful conclusion.[19] The initial Italian reactions to this and other feelers, as well as some rumors about the talks that the Polish foreign minister had held in Rome around the time of the Anschluss,20 did not seem negative. Ciano made it clear that, as far as he was concerned, there was no "problem" between France and Italy, but only a "psychological issue"; the sole outstanding technical matter was that of the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway, to be settled among experts, and this should not stand in the way of a complete understanding between the two countries. Italy was on the verge of concluding negotiations with England; even though there had been no official contact with France, it was possible to reach an agreement with France as well in a short time.[21] It is difficult to say how sincere Ciano was in presenting this picture of Italian-French relations. Given the circumstances, however, his good faith cannot be ruled out entirely. What is certain is that his response played a significant role in persuading the new French Foreign Minister, G. Bonnet (on April 12, Daladier had replaced Blum as head of the Popular Front government), to give the green light to negotiations, while establishing very precise and limited parameters for them, closely tied to the agreements signed by Laval and Mussolini in January 1935 22.

In reality, the Italian-French rapprochement would never materialize. The preliminary talks between Ciano and Blondel, which took place in parallel and in the wake of the conclusion of the "Easter Agreements" with the aim of defining the basis for the actual negotiations, were viewed—especially by the British press—as a sign that reconciliation between Rome and Paris was now well underway (as early as April 20, the *Times* wrote, "It is already clear that the atmosphere on both sides has improved considerably, making a postponement of the planned talks unlikely"), and the *Daily Herald*, on April 20, went so far as to predict that the Anglo-Italian and Franco-Italian agreements would be followed by an attempt to induce Germany to accept a new "four-power pact," a hypothesis that, moreover, found little support in broad political circles in both Britain and France, which considered it outside the political framework of the great democratic powers), came to nothing, even though, formally, they left matters open for the time being. And, in reality, without either side having to commit to anything. The French wanted to closely link the agreement to the one concluded

20 On the Polish foreign minister's mission, see E. Costa Bona, "Colonel Beck's Visit to Rome in March 1938," in *Il politico*, June 1979, pp. 316 ff. In addition to Ciano, Beck also met with Mussolini, who struck him as unable to oppose Hitler's designs on Austria and Czechoslovakia, but "seriously" concerned "that Germany's actions might extend too vigorously in a southeasterly direction." For further details, see J. Beck, *Dernier rapport politique polonais 1926–39*, Neuchâtel 1931, pp. 145 ff.

in January 1935, which was highly favorable to them, and, for the rest, to model it on the Anglo-Italian

agreement (with a few variations in their favor) and thus definitively settle all ongoing and potential disputes.[23] Officially, they appeared in great haste to conclude it; in reality, a postponement of the negotiations suited them perfectly. As D'Amoja24 has aptly pointed out, the French government, like the British one, wanted to prevent Italy from further strengthening its ties with the Axis during Hitler's upcoming visit, "but while London had sought to achieve this goal by signing the agreement with Italy and partially satisfying its demands—albeit after leaving the agreement's entry into force in limbo, like a sword of Damocles hanging over the Italian government—the government in Paris limited itself to insisting on the possibility of concluding an agreement, implying that this would depend on the outcome of Hitler's visit." On the Italian side, however, there was no sense of urgency, either officially or in practice. Having concluded the agreement with London and made it known that they were willing to reach an agreement with Paris as well—and thus having significantly strengthened their position vis-à-vis Germany—they wanted, for the time being—before deciding whether to proceed further and on what terms—to see the outcome of the talks with the Germans during Hitler's visit to Italy.

Hitler's trip to Italy must be viewed, from the perspective of Italian-German relations, by taking into account the differing positions of the two parties involved. As has been noted, until toward the end of 1937, Hitler had ruled out entering into a military alliance with Italy. In determining this position, he was likely influenced to some extent by the views of broad sectors of the German political and military establishment that favored a "supportive" stance, as well as by a large portion of the old staff at Wilhelmstrasse—all of whom were more or less skeptical of Italy's military effectiveness and reliability as an ally (in late June 1937, speaking with L. Blum, Schacht had not minced words: "We know," he had told him,[25] "that Italy is never a completely reliable ally") and, in general, were inclined to temper the Führer's dynamism. The main reason, however, lies in Hitler's dual hope—still alive at the time—either to reach an agreement with England or to take advantage of an Italian-Anglo-French conflict triggered by Italian policy in Spain (symptomatic of this are the "advice" von Ribbentrop had given Ciano in late October "never to abandon Mallorca again, a new formidable pawn in our

in the Mediterranean"26) to get his hands on Austria and the Sudetenland. The failure of von Ribbentrop's special mission to London, his appointment as foreign minister, the turning point of February 427, and the start of Italian-British negotiations had, however, brought about a change of course. Convinced of the impracticability of the two paths he had pursued and determined nonetheless to speed up the resolution of the Austrian and Czechoslovak issues, Hitler had begun to seriously consider the need to formalize the Axis. This was all the more true after the Anschluss, which, while on the one hand had demonstrated Mussolini's "willingness," on the other had revealed his dissatisfaction with Berlin's initiative and, therefore, the urgency for Germany to preempt and block his possible "flight" to London and Paris. The date on which von Weizsäcker[28] places Hitler's decision to conclude an alliance treaty with Mussolini—April 2, 1938—is significant. The Italian perspective was different. First of all, Mussolini and Ciano realized that the Axis, especially after the Anschluss, was by no means popular in Italy and that, if they wished to make it closer and more effective, extensive preparation was still needed at all levels. Opposed to a military alliance were, among others, certain military figures, such as the Deputy Chief of the Army General Staff, General Soddu, and, behind them, the sovereign. As if that were not enough, there was also a whole series of specific issues and fundamental problems to be resolved. Among the first was the issue of South Tyrol, which had been abruptly reopened—despite Hitler's letter of March 11—by the Anschluss (on April 3, Ciano had noted: "In South Tyrol, propaganda continues that we cannot tolerate: the 212,000 Germans are becoming too assertive, and there is even talk of a border at Ala or Salorno. I advised the Duce to discuss this with the Führer. In Italy, the anti-German movement, fomented by Catholics, Freemasons, and Jews, is growing ever stronger. If the Germans make reckless moves in South Tyrol, the Axis could collapse at any moment"29), and that of a serious and precise definition of the spheres of mutual interest in the

Danube-Balkan region of Europe, where German dynamism boded ill and showed no intention of respecting Italy's "acquired rights" and "hunting grounds." Among the latter, a key concern was Hitler's plans—primarily those concerning Czechoslovakia—in which Mussolini and Ciano did not wish to be directly involved, and certainly not in a way that would irreparably jeopardize their relations with London and, to a lesser extent, with Paris. In this situation, talk of an alliance was out of the question.

And in fact—as Toscano30 has clearly pointed out—the strictly political aspect of Hitler's visit to Italy (May 3–9, 1938) was quite modest and, all things considered, more akin to a farcical opera ballet than to that "extremely important summit meeting" that the propaganda apparatuses of the two countries strove to portray it as. The Germans repeatedly sought to "press" the Italians and steer the conversations toward concrete matters; the Italians, on the other hand, sought not to reveal too much of their true intentions[31] and, above all, to avoid any binding discussions, taking advantage of the exceptional demands placed on them by the grand ceremonies on the schedule and the limited time these left them. Paul Schmidt, the chief interpreter for the Nazi leadership, has provided us in his memoirs with a telling account of this dance32:

During the eight days of the trip, amid receptions at royal palaces, official banquets, and spectacular events that followed one another almost incessantly, I had relatively little to do as an interpreter... The... main reason for my relatively light workload throughout the trip was the Italians' reserve. Mussolini and Ciano visibly avoided any serious political discussion, which Hitler—and even more so Ribbentrop —occasionally tried to broach. The itinerary itself—which did not allow for any free time for such discussions—already reflected that Italian attitude; nevertheless, during the various receptions, it would have been easy to discuss political issues, something Hitler and Ribbentrop would have very much desired. But both the Italian dictator and his son-in-law made a point of pretending not to notice.

Even if I had had any doubts about this attitude on the part of the Italians, they would have vanished upon seeing how they reacted when we presented them with a proposal for an alliance... Ciano let a few days pass before submitting a "counterproposal" to us, which did not deserve that name at all. It was a piece of paper that said absolutely nothing and thus constituted an obvious rejection. There was then a brief and heated discussion between Ribbentrop and Ciano,

31 On May 12, 1938, von Weizsäcker summarized the Italian position as it had emerged from the talks as follows. Italy appeared to be pursuing a policy of consolidation, peace, security, and rearmament. "One must not conclude from this that Italy will, in the future, declare itself fully satisfied in the Mediterranean; but Italy's long-term objectives in the Mediterranean are not yet, it seems, determined. They must be sought in a policy directed primarily against France, while England will be spared as much as possible. Nothing has indicated that Italy has ambitions regarding Spanish territories. Italy's policy toward Spain, like its policy toward China, would appear to have remained unchanged; there is a general sense of resentment toward the United States, and Russia is ignored. It is believed that France has entered an era of internal decline and is heading toward civil war" (DGFP, s. D, I, p. ino).

32 P. Schmidt, *From Versailles to Nuremberg*, op. cit., pp. 360 ff. The picture painted by Ribbentrop's then chief of staff, E. Kordt, in *Wahn und Wirklichkeit* (Stuttgart, 1947), pp. 106 ff., is not dissimilar.

This stood in truly grotesque contrast to what was presented to the public on the grand stage of official events. Ribbentrop's chief trait was his stubbornness. I have seen him insist on a proposal on several occasions, without even hesitating to be rude. He would wear down his opponent to the point of forcing

him to say yes, even if reluctantly. He attempted this tactic once again, but it was unsuccessful. “The solidarity between our two regimes,” said Ciano with a smile that struck me as sarcastic, “has been so clearly demonstrated in recent days that a formal alliance treaty is superfluous!” From these words, I believed I understood that the Italians had not yet come to terms with the Anschluss, much less the methods by which it had been imposed. Their gaze was still turned toward the West, as Chamberlain’s diary confirms today. None of this, however, was revealed to the outside world at that time.

At the beginning of the visit, Ciano submitted to von Ribbentrop a draft agreement aimed at formally guaranteeing respect for the common borders and at precisely defining and safeguarding their respective interests in the Danube-Balkan region. According to von Weizsäcker[33], it “resembled more a peace treaty with an enemy than an alliance treaty with a friend.” But in Rome, there must have been hope of getting the Germans to accept it as a sort of lesser evil. This, at least, seems to be inferred from a note by Ciano dated May 10, referring to its preparation[34]:

I presented the outline of a possible treaty with Germany to the Leader. He agreed. I will propose it to Ribbentrop, pointing out that it is in our mutual interest to sign it. We have made a pact with London; soon we will make one with the French: if we do not establish our positions with Berlin as well, everyone will say that the Axis is finished and that we are returning to Stresa.

Von Ribbentrop’s response, however, was to present a draft military alliance, “public or secret” at Italy’s discretion. In the following days, Hitler personally discussed the matter—albeit, it seems, with some caution—with Mussolini at least three times, but to no avail. On May 5, Ciano (who was opposed to the idea of an alliance[35]) noted the following in this regard:

Ribbentrop has offered us a pact of military assistance, public or secret, at our discretion. I certainly expressed my opposition to the Duce, just as I delayed the conclusion of a pact of consultation and political assistance.

The Duce intends to go ahead with it. And we will do so because he has a thousand and one reasons not to trust the Western democracies. But I thought it best to delay it, so as not to create difficulties for Chamberlain on the eve of the [League of Nations] Council meeting. He will have to secure recognition of the Empire there. The signing of a pact—which could have been open to various interpretations, including that of a secret alliance—would have made his task more difficult and provided ammunition to the opposition in Geneva.

In the end, the exchange of toasts at the conclusion of the luncheon in honor of the guest at Palazzo Venezia[37] proved to be the most politically significant event. As foreign observers immediately noted, on this occasion as well, Mussolini was much more reserved (and, according to Blondel[38], “cold”) than Hitler. The “Duce,” who, on top of everything else, had been left with a very poor impression—just like Ciano (“He talks about waging wars left and right, without a specific adversary or a defined objective”)—of von Ribbentrop and his warmongering frenzy (“he belongs to the category of Germans who bring misfortune to Germany,” he had told his son-in-law the day before)[39], did not go beyond expressions such as “the ethical law of friendship,” “ideal commonality,” and “collaboration,” and placed great emphasis on peace and “international coexistence.”

Germany and Italy—he said—have left behind the utopian ideals to which Europe had blindly entrusted its fate, in order to seek among themselves and with others a system of international coexistence that can establish, equitably for all, more effective guarantees of justice, security, and peace. This can be achieved only when the fundamental rights of every people to live, work, and

defend themselves are faithfully recognized, and the political balance corresponds to the reality of the historical forces that constitute and determine it. We are convinced that it is along this path that the nations of Europe will find the tranquility and peace that are indispensable for preserving the very foundations of European civilization.

Hitler used much more passionate, almost lyrical terms. He spoke of “shared interests” and a “commonality of ideologies” that closely bound Germany and Italy; of the development and deepening, “in close collaboration for the future,” of the friendship that had grown ever stronger in recent years; and of the “inevitability of a shared destiny” for the two races. And finally—it is difficult to say whether out of clumsiness or in an extreme attempt to dispel the shadow of the Anschluss, which had so heavily influenced the Italian attitude in those days—he reiterated the assurances he had already given in his letter two months earlier.

“It is my unwavering will,” he said in a solemn and almost inspired tone, “and it is also my political testament to the German people, that the Alpine border erected between us by nature be considered inviolable forever. I am certain that a glorious and prosperous future will result from this for both Rome and Germany.”

As we have noted elsewhere, “in making this solemn declaration, Hitler was personally sincere; unlike other Nazi leaders, for him the alliance with Italy was truly worth writing off South Tyrol as a ‘loss.’ Precisely this makes it all the more significant—in that it shows just how uncertain Hitler was about his ability to persuade Mussolini to enter into a genuine alliance—that the Germans, until they had almost completely attained this certainty, engaged in a sort of passive resistance to publicizing Hitler’s “political testament” in Germany and, even more so, to translating it, as Rome desired, into an official diplomatic document. And this despite the fact that, as early as April 20, the Italians had approached Göring to request—as Ciano had written to Magistrati— Berlin publicly disavow the “seditious attempts” of the South Tyrolean irredentists and silence “the zealots who strive to keep alive an issue that must instead be considered closed—and closed forever,” and Göring had shown that he shared the view “that any German expansionist ambitions regarding Tyrol must be nipped in the bud.” In practice, the Germans used the South Tyrol issue as a means of pressure to induce Mussolini to accept the idea of an alliance, knowing full well that the South Tyrol problem—which until then had been, all things considered, marginal for the regime—had now become, due to its domestic and international repercussions, substantial. So substantial, we might add, that when the “Duce” was informed on April 24 by Ciano of the outcome of Magistrati’s meeting with Göring, he went so far—in one of his typical outbursts of anger—as to even consider the possibility of a conflict. Ciano wrote in his diary under that date[41]:

The Duce and I spoke at length once again about the South Tyrol issue. Göring’s reply, conveyed through Magistrati, has arrived, though it does not seem very explicit to me.

Later, the Duce called me: “I have made my position on this matter clear. If the Germans behave themselves and are respectful Italian subjects, I will be able to support their culture and their language. If, however, they think of moving the border post even a single meter, let them know that this will not happen without the fiercest war, in which I will rally the entire world against Germanism. And we will bring Germany to its knees for at least two centuries.”

During his talks in Rome with Mussolini, Hitler—taking up an idea already proposed by Göring to Renzetti and Magistrati—had suggested, as a solution to the South Tyrol question, the transfer of non-Germans to Germany. Mussolini—who in 1941 would describe as providential, “when ethnicity does

not align with geography," the resort to population exchanges and the exodus of part of the population for the purpose of aligning race, nation, and state[42]—had refused. And this despite the fact that Ciano had already been considering the idea for a month and was personally in favor of it[43]. Nor should this come as a surprise. While for his son-in-law the issue of the German minority in South Tyrol was essentially a political matter to be resolved as quickly and radically as possible in order to prevent it from interfering in Italian domestic and foreign policy, for Mussolini, resolving it as the Germans proposed would have amounted to a resounding acknowledgment of the failure of his bold plans—widely publicized in previous years—and of the related efforts to Italianize South Tyrol, and —what would have been worse—the groundlessness of his claim to "shape" the younger generations according to his will. With Hitler's visit ending in a stalemate, Berlin effectively dropped the matter of the South Tyrolean minority, yet at the same time did nothing to bring about its normalization.

On the surface, Hitler's visit ended with almost no tangible results. In fact, it immediately had very significant consequences for Italian foreign policy and led to—or brought to fruition in the weeks and months that followed—a series of domestic and foreign policy initiatives which, while neither decisive nor irreversible, heavily influenced the reality and image of the regime in Italy and abroad, as well as Mussolini's subsequent decisions.

The "Duce"—partly out of his own awareness, partly because he was still under the impression of the Anschluss, partly due to the influence of Ciano, who did not want to jeopardize the good relations so fortuitously reestablished with London and the favorable prospects for an improvement in those with Paris, and partly, probably, because of the difficulty of countering with a "minor" agreement after an alliance had been offered to him, had not wanted to conclude any binding official agreement with Hitler. As events unfolded, however, things must have gone beyond his intentions and those of Ciano himself. Rejecting the overly demanding offer of an alliance was one thing; having to renounce the pact of mutual respect—or something else that would in any case give the Axis a more precise meaning and underscore its vitality—was quite another. Just as Ciano had foreseen, the risk was—and the initial reactions of the most authoritative and responsible international press confirmed this—that the conclusion would be drawn that the Axis was in trouble and that Mussolini was setting sail for other shores. This would have two consequences: a) it would give a different meaning than intended to the planned rapprochement with France and weaken Italy's bargaining power in the related negotiations; b) to make relations with the British more difficult regarding the withdrawal of the "volunteers" from Spain. Not to mention a third consequence, no less—and perhaps even more—serious for Mussolini: that people in Italy and abroad would think the Axis's difficulties stemmed from its extremely low popularity and even hostility among Italians—a perception confirmed by the lukewarm public participation in the ceremonies honoring Hitler. And this, mind you, came at the very moment when Mussolini could claim to have achieved—or to believe he had achieved—at least three things of great importance. First: that Hitler wanted an alliance with him, and while, on the one hand, this was more than Mussolini himself desired, on the other hand, it constituted a source of strength and a major temptation for him—both because it safeguarded him from the much-feared danger of isolation and because it enabled him to count on German support for a whole series of operations, support that had until then proved highly unpredictable and ambiguous. Second: that Hitler, precisely because he wanted an alliance with him, was willing to play hardball to secure it, as demonstrated by his stance on the South Tyrol issue and as would soon be shown by certain maneuvers of his targeting the most valuable of Italy's "hunting grounds," Albania. Third: that Hitler, for the time being, did not intend to resolve the Sudetenland issue by "dismantling" Czechoslovakia, but only by "dividing it into cantons"; and that (and here Mussolini had been somewhat deceived by Hitler, and had himself somewhat prejudiced the situation by declaring in no uncertain terms his "disinterest" in Czechoslovakia's fate and his "complete solidarity" with German claims against it44) "any recourse to force was to be ruled out, at least for a

few years”[45], which gave him ample leeway, both in terms of general political maneuvering and, in particular, to achieve certain expansionist objectives with German backing and without the open opposition of a Britain interested in maintaining good relations with him.

To this, in order to have a complete picture of the situation, it must be added that—despite the extravaganza of events organized in honor of the guest and Starace’s efforts to mobilize the party and its affiliated organizations—Hitler’s visit had in no way contributed to making Italians more favorable toward Germany and, if anything, had increased the doubts and deep-seated fears held by many. In particular, it had prompted a series of statements from Pius XI and the Holy See, the repercussions of which were not confined to the Catholic world in the strict sense but had reverberated across much broader sectors of the country, giving many hope that, in the face of the Church’s opposition, Mussolini would back down—and, among the dormant anti-fascist movement, even that an open rift was about to occur between the Vatican and Palazzo Venezia—one that fascism could not survive. The fact that the Church was hostile to National Socialism had long been known and had been officially affirmed not only through a series of public statements, protests, and condemnations of books by Nazi authors, but also by the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*. Published in March 1937 almost simultaneously with *Divini Redemptoris* against communism, the encyclical had, however, received far less attention than the news that the pope, to emphasize his disapproval of Hitler’s visit, had left Rome and retired to Castel Gandolfo, where, in a public address, he had said:[46]

Sad things are happening, very sad things, both far away and close at hand. Among these sad things is this: that it is not considered too out of place or untimely to hoist in Rome, on the Feast of the Holy Cross, the banner of another cross that is not the Cross of Christ. This says it all to make one understand to what extent it is necessary to pray, pray, pray, so that God’s mercy may be granted and descend in all its fullness.

Suffice it to say that Mussolini, instead of ignoring the whole matter to prevent it from gaining further attention, authorized the publication in *Il Popolo d’Italia* of a scathing editorial by Goffredo Coppola that explicitly took issue with the Pope:[47]

If we must speak plainly, we would like to tell the Father of all of us Catholics that four hundred and fifty years have passed since the day Don Pedro Marique brought the relic of Saint Eugene to Toledo; and that today it is very dangerous to speak

Cardinal Pacelli informed Ambassador Pignatti that the pope considered the article’s closing line “insulting to his person” and that, if “no immediate action were taken, the Pope would see to it himself that matters were set right,” ASAE, Holy See, b. 39 (1938).

of the cross of Christ and brandish it as if it were a weapon, only to find oneself then in the menacing and sneering company of usurers, Freemasons, and Bolsheviks—no longer even holding the whip to drive them from the temple of God, but alone, desperately alone, praying, praying, praying.

Nor had the results been any better as far as the Fascist leadership and the sovereign were concerned. Ciano’s diary is explicit regarding Victor Emmanuel III. On May 7, it reads: “The King remains [toward Hitler] consistently hostile and tends to portray him as a sort of psychophysically degenerate”48. At the top of the regime, few dared to take a stand against the possibility of closer agreements with Germany, and only Balbo had the courage to confront Mussolini on the issue in no uncertain terms,[49] but most were perplexed, concerned, some outright hostile, or at any rate believed that relations with Germany should not go beyond certain limits and should serve above all to break

theisolation in which Italy had found itself due to the war in Africa and its intervention in Spain, and to serve as a “passport” for re-entering—without “paying the price” and while still reaping some benefit—the consortium of “satisfied” and peaceful great powers. There were few staunch pro-Nazi figures, and Hitler’s visit—while it had heightened doubts and fears among others and paved the way for the overcoming of old personal and political conflicts (as in the typical case of Balbo and Grandi) in the name of a shared opposition to the danger of closer relations with Germany—had not significantly swelled their ranks. This—and this was one of the most damaging and far-reaching aspects of the entire affair—does not, however, mean that the issue of relations with Germany did not also find many who were ready to exploit it for their own personal and power-seeking ends. Under the date of July 12, 1938, Bottai’s diary contains a highly significant entry on this subject:[50]

Nazi Germany seems to have become the litmus test of our faith. A trip to Germany is a valuable asset for party officials and their subordinates seeking to advance their fortunes. It is around Germany that the interplay of trends and counter-trends takes shape. The zeal, reservations, suspicions, hopes, and fears of a closed regime are revealed here, in this “external” sphere of politics (but “external” in such a way that the motives of the “internal” sphere are reflected there and color the discussion).

48 G. Ciano, Diario, op. cit., p. 134. Less explicit, but essentially conveying the same political meaning, was what De Bono noted two days later in his diary regarding the king’s attitude: “Skeptical about German friendship; he did not believe the Führer was in control of the situation. In South Tyrol, some terrible incidents have occurred...” (ACS, E. De Bono, Diary, Q. 43). For another outburst by the king, see N. D’Aroma, *Ventanni insieme*, op. cit., pp. 259 ff.

This is why the foreign press, especially the French press, focuses on it as well. Because it seeks out in that region those differing attitudes that rigid orthodoxy for domestic consumption no longer permits.

If one does not take this situation into account, it is difficult to grasp just how numerous and significant the consequences of Hitler’s visit were. Let us begin with the domestic ones.

Personally, Mussolini—as we have seen—could have his own uncertainties and doubts. What he absolutely could not tolerate, however, was for others to harbor doubts or, worse still, to question the wisdom of his actions or even dare to oppose him. Domestically, this resulted in an immediate intensification of his criticism and hostility toward the monarchy, the Church, and the bourgeoisie (that is, those he considered the most tenacious obstacles and adversaries to his policies); the acceleration and radicalization of his plans to turn the regime into a totalitarian one; and the launch of a two-pronged campaign at all levels, aimed, on the one hand, to convince Italians of the “historical necessity” of the Axis and the “convergence of the Fascist revolution and the National Socialist revolution,” and, on the other hand, to stir up “a wave of anti-French sentiment to free Italians from their final bondage: that to Paris”51. The instrument and driving force behind this action was the PNF, which Starace immediately mobilized and engaged in a series of initiatives that, in essence, would largely prove counterproductive (on September 5, the party secretary would confess to Ciano: “It repulses me to utter this word, but there is a whiff of Quartarella in the air. The Party is solid and in good shape. The same goes for the people. The rebellion, however, lies within the bourgeoisie”[52]; and a little over a month later, when—as we shall see—following Munich the party’s activities had been further intensified, De Bono would note in his diary, in a completely different spirit, that, according to Bocchini, we were heading “toward a Starace dictatorship” supported by G. Ciano and Farinacci 55), but that, apparently—and especially with regard to

In connection with the totalitarian crackdown following Hitler’s visit, there was—according to G.

Bottai's diary (f. 569, dated July 21, 1938)—an attempt by Starace and Ciano to remove Bocchini as chief of police and replace him with a "trusted man," apparently Celso Luciano. This information is credible not only from the perspective of the power struggles among the various groups, but also from a more strictly political standpoint. For while Bocchini was, on the one hand, a highly efficient police chief (see P. Carucci, "Arturo Bocchini," in *Uomini e volti del fascismo*, ed. F. Cordova, Rome 1980, pp. 63 ff.), on the other hand he was and always remained a man of the old regime who, even if he was not playing both sides, he nevertheless operated according to a logic that was certainly not totalitarian and maintained a series of contacts with opponents and critics of the regime—it is difficult to determine whether this was intended to monitor them more closely or to avoid severing ties with them entirely in anticipation of a possible change at the top. By replacing the regime's leadership and a large portion of its mid-level officials, they undoubtedly succeeded in "bringing many of the critics into line." A note by Ciano dated June 21 is symptomatic in this regard:[54]

Inauguration of the Italo-German Law Congress, with a good speech by Frank [German Minister of Justice]. Even the anti-Axis figures Bottai and De Francisci applauded warmly. They've sensed the wind is changing...

We will not dwell on this further, however, as we have already discussed it in previous chapters. The official launch of racial policy during this same period, however, deserves a more detailed discussion. We have already discussed its precedents, its two phases, its general motivations, and certain aspects of it; given its importance and the vast scope of the repercussions it had, however, it is appropriate to examine its events more closely here and to attempt to define its connection to Hitler's visit.

By July 1938, the conditions were ripe for the racial issue to enter its second phase—the one that was more strictly anti-Semitic—and to become one of the cornerstones of the regime's policy. Mussolini had become convinced of its political and ideological necessity. The small initial core of anti-Semitic Fascists around G. Preziosi had grown stronger and organically merged with that faction of Fascism—of which Farinacci was the most prominent and authoritative figure—which, partly out of political choice and partly to revitalize its leadership within the party and the regime, was now staking everything on close Italian-German collaboration and alliance and on a Nazi-style totalitarian transformation of Fascism. German influence, both overt and covert, was beginning to bear fruit, including, precisely, the emergence of a limited form of anti-Semitism that was nevertheless capable of manifesting itself in the pages of a number of periodicals and party publications—or on the fringes of the party. 55 Finally, Italian-German relations had reached a point where, even on a practical level, the anti-Semitic choice was, as has been said, practically inevitable. Yet there is no doubt that Hitler's visit also had a significant influence on the adoption of racial policy—or, rather, on its transition from the first to the second phase. And, it is worth repeating, not because the Germans had made formal requests to that effect (this has not yet been proven; it is denied by Ciano and, all things considered, is improbable given the situation. See, for example, G. Caronia, *Con Sturzo e con De Gasperi*, Rome 1979, pp. 103 ff.

55 See, in this regard, the observations made by the French chargé d'affaires to the Holy See, Rivière, as early as January 29, 1938, in DDF, vol. II, VIII, pp. 136 ff.; as well as, for a broader overview, R. de Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, op. cit., pp. 204 ff.

Although Mussolini would later tell Grandi—it is not entirely clear whether to apologize or, more likely, to emphasize his resistance to German offers of alliance—that Hitler had asked him for both an alliance and an anti-Semitic policy and he had granted only the latter[56]), the reason was that for Mussolini this was the moment to embark, with banners flying, on the path of state anti-Semitism. It

was so psychologically, because even if he still harbored some doubts about its advisability, they were bound to vanish in the face of the intensity of his irritation toward the bourgeoisie, the Church, and the monarchy, and his conviction that racial policy would constitute the most powerful "punch" he could deliver to them. It was politically significant on the domestic front, because instilling a "racial consciousness" in Italians had by then become, for him, a fundamental step in the construction of the "new Fascist man." And it was politically significant on the international stage as well, because it allowed him, on the one hand, to clearly highlight the profound difference that had to exist between Fascist Italy and the democratic countries (and above all France), with which Italy might even find common ground, but with the awareness that they were something different from which, by now, "nothing but pourriture" could come, and, on the other hand, to reassure Hitler—alliance or no alliance—about the actual direction of his march and to refute rumors that the Axis was in trouble.

In February 1938, when all of Rome's efforts had been directed toward initiating negotiations with London and the aim was to clear the way of any possible obstacles, Mussolini had issued, on the 16th, "Diplomatic Information" No. 14, which, while declaring that the Fascist government reserved the right "to monitor the activities of Jews who have recently arrived in our country and to ensure that the role of Jews in the life of the nation as a whole is not disproportionate to their individual intrinsic merits and the numerical significance of their community," it unequivocally asserted the groundlessness of the "impression" held "in certain foreign circles" "that the Fascist government is about to inaugurate an anti-Semitic policy." The Jewish problem, the note continued, could be resolved only "by creating a Jewish state somewhere in the world, not in Palestine." As for the Fascist government, it had never considered—and did not consider even now—"taking political, economic, or moral measures against Jews as such, except, of course, in the case of elements hostile to the Regime."57 Just five months later, but in an international context that was very different for Mussolini, the publication on July 14 of the "scientists'" manifesto on race clearly showed how instrumental that declaration had been.[58]

Eleven days after the manifesto's publication, on July 25, a press release from the National Fascist Party (PNF) disclosed the names of those who had drafted the manifesto and those who had endorsed it, and announced that it had been prepared under the auspices of the Ministry of Popular Culture.[59] Immediately afterward, in an atmosphere heated to the extreme by the concerted action of nearly the entire press (on August 5, the infamous fortnightly *La difesa della razza*, edited by Telesio Interlandi, was set to begin publication on August 5 with great fanfare)—"more servilely repugnant than usual," as De Bono would note in his diary in mid-September[60]—the machinery of anti-Semitic measures was set in motion[61]. On September 2–3, the Council of Ministers approved a first batch of these measures. Foreign Jews were prohibited from taking up residence in the Kingdom, in Libya, and in the Aegean; those already residing there were required to leave within six months; those who had obtained Italian citizenship after 1918 had it revoked. As for education, Jews were excluded from teaching at all levels and grades, and students of "Jewish race" were prohibited from attending public schools; for elementary school students, special sections were established in localities where their number was not fewer than ten; for middle school students, the Jewish communities were permitted to establish private schools.

The initial measures concerning foreign Jews did not apply to East Africa. This clearly illustrates Mussolini's position. As mentioned, the "Diplomatic Bulletin" of February 16 had alluded to the need to create "somewhere in the world," "not in Palestine" (the concern to win Arab sympathy and, at the same time, not to further alarm England is evident), "a Jewish state." This reference had been interpreted by the international press—and even by some governments—to mean that Mussolini intended to establish the Jewish state in the Italian East African Empire (AOI) and, more specifically, in the Lake Tana region inhabited by the Falashas. Requests for clarification on this point were, at the

time, dismissed by Palazzo Chigi. There is no doubt, however, that in 1938

58 The purely instrumental nature of “Diplomatic Information” No. 14 becomes even more evident from a piece of news gathered by G. Bottai and recorded in his diary on July 16, 1938 (ff. 564 ff.): Mussolini had reportedly entrusted Guido Landra with preparing the manifesto as early as October 1937, declaring to him that he considered himself “a ‘Nordic’ man, not at all akin to the French, but rather to the English and the Germans.”

59 According to the aforementioned diary of G. Bottai (ff. 363 ff.), Starace and the PNF had been kept completely in the dark and were taken by surprise, like everyone else, by the publication of the manifesto.

Mussolini thought (and continued to think so for quite some time) of settling the Jews (as a state or, more likely, as a reserve) in some part of the Italian East Indies (AOI). Ciano’s diary is clear on this point. On August 30, it reads[62]:

The Duce... also informs me of his plan to make Migiurtinia a concession for international Jews. He says that the country has considerable natural resources that the Jews could exploit.

and on September 4[63]:

As for the concentration colony for Jews, the Duce no longer mentions Migiurtinia but rather the Oltre-Giuba region, which would offer better living and working conditions.

Nor did the matter remain at the stage of mere speculation: around the same time, the head of the Empire’s Central Cartographic Office, Colonel G. Adami, was in fact tasked with studying on site the possibility of settling an initial group of 1,400 Jewish heads of households in Ethiopia.[64] This is of considerable interest in that it demonstrates that Mussolini, at the very moment he was introducing anti-Semitic legislation, was entertaining the idea of finding a solution to the “Jewish question” and using it to enhance the Empire.

Following the measures of September 2–3, the next step consisted of the resolutions adopted by the Grand Council on October 6, which were intended to establish the “cornerstones” of Fascist racial policy. The roughly one-month interval between the meeting of the Council of Ministers and that of the Grand Council was decisive in more ways than one. It was, in fact, devoted to clearing the way of the two major obstacles that potentially stood in the way of the passage of comprehensive anti-Semitic legislation. Mussolini had no difficulty overcoming the first of these: Victor Emmanuel III. The sovereign was certainly no anti-Semite, but neither was he the sort of man to enter into a head-on confrontation with Mussolini over such a matter, especially if it meant making common cause with “the priests.”[65] This was all the more true after Buffarini-Guidi had informed him of the “moderate” terms on which the “Duce” intended to frame racial policy. The report that the Undersecretary of the Interior gave to Mussolini on September 12 leaves no room for doubt[66]:

Duce,

I have the honor of reporting to you the terms of the conversation I had at San Rossore with His Majesty the King on the occasion of the swearing-in of several bishops.

Faced with the anti-Jewish policy implemented by the Regime, the King was in the frame of mind You had anticipated. While
he spoke in fully favorable terms about the measures adopted against Jews of foreign nationality, he expressed reservations regarding the decisions taken against Jews of Italian nationality.

He asked me to present two letters to you: one from Colonel Ugo Modena, Commander of His Majesty's Fossalta Division, appealing for general leniency, and one from Lieutenant Valfredo Segre, formerly of the Legionary Air Force, which accompanied the return of a medal for valor.

I immediately conveyed to the King what you had instructed me to communicate to him, namely that specific distinctions would be made for Jews of Italian nationality, through which various categories (those decorated for valor, volunteers and the disabled from the four wars, those disabled in the service of the Fascist cause, etc.) would have their merits recognized.

The King then became completely reassured and said, verbatim: "I am truly pleased that the President intends to proceed with these distinctions, recognizing the merits of those Jews who have distinguished themselves through their devotion to the Fatherland," and added: "I was certain that the President's great sensitivity, profound insight, and boundless generosity would have led to such a course of action."

The King then engaged me in conversation about the Jewish Dr. Stykold, whom he described as one of the greatest clinicians currently in Italy, and expressed his hope that he might be allowed to remain in our country to practice his profession.

It was more difficult to overcome the obstacle posed by the Holy See—or, rather, by Pius XI. At the time of the Grand Council meeting, the issue with the Holy See had not yet been resolved. In the end, however, this obstacle would also be overcome. A moderate anti-Semitism was, after all, part of Catholic tradition, and there was no shortage of members of the Italian clergy who, following in the wake of *Civiltà Cattolica*, regarded Jews as an important component of liberalism, democracy, Freemasonry, and Bolshevism.[67] Faced with arguments such as those Farinacci put forward in a lecture delivered in Milan on November 7—later reproduced in a widely distributed pamphlet titled *La Chiesa e gli Ebrei* (The Church and the Jews)—these individuals felt uneasy and could not refute the Cremonese leader, who demonstrated to them that by becoming anti-Semitic, Fascism had done nothing more than conform to "the teachings given to us by the Church over twenty centuries" and, bolstered by this argument, he asked menacingly whether, by any chance, "the official Church" might suddenly feel pro-Semitic "because today the communists, the Freemasons, the democrats—the Church's declared enemies—are offering her their services and lavishing praise upon her." Furthermore, for many others—among the clergy as well as in the Vatican—there was the issue of Catholic Action, which made it absurd to think of pitting one conflict against another, whereas a more flexible attitude toward the former might perhaps facilitate a favorable resolution of the latter. This helps explain why, even though the overwhelming majority of Italian Catholics were firmly opposed to the anti-Semitic measures, the Holy See's opposition was relatively weak—especially when compared to the energy expended in defending Catholic Action—and was of a formalistic-legal nature rather than substantive, and in any case directed against "racism" and not—except for a passing remark by Pius XI in the very early stages of the controversy to a group of Belgian pilgrims ("no, it is not possible for Christians to participate in anti-Semitism"; "anti-Semitism is inadmissible; we are spiritually Semites") —against anti-Semitism pure and simple.

With the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, the Church had condemned Nazi racism—atheistic and materialistic—but Italian racism presented itself with different characteristics; in many respects, it

could even have been “harmonized” with the Church’s position. This was undoubtedly the opinion of a significant portion of the Italian Catholic leadership. It is no coincidence that *La Civiltà Cattolica*, in its August 6 issue, commenting on the “scientists’” manifesto, wrote:

Anyone familiar with the tenets of German racism will immediately notice the marked divergence between those and the proposals put forward by this group of Italian fascist scholars. This would confirm that Italian fascism does not wish to be conflated with Nazism or German racism, which is intrinsically and explicitly materialistic and anti-Christian.

And, much more explicitly, in the wake of the manifesto’s publication, the Jesuit A. Brucculeri had written in Rome’s *L’Avvenire* on July 17 (“Italian Racism”) what amounted to a veritable ode to the manifesto itself.

But even without reducing everything to these extreme positions, it is clear that the colonial aspect of racist policy found support among Vatican circles and Catholics in general, and that the anti-Semitic aspect of “discriminating but not persecuting”—announced on August 5 in *Informazione diplomatica* No. 18—found support among the former and part of the latter. What worried most people was that, with the “scientists’” manifesto, Italian racism would become a “theoretical stance” and “an ideology with intangible axioms.” Even more worrying was the fact that Fascism did not target Jews as a religion but as a race—that is, in simple terms, even Jews who had converted to Catholicism. Had the measures not infringed upon the Church’s rights under the Concordat and its prestige—by denying it the right to protect all those who had placed themselves or would place themselves under its protection—it is doubtful that they would have provoked its opposition. The fascist government’s reasons were, in fact—with the exception of these two specific aspects—“understood” by many in the Vatican, and “some positive aspects” of the measures were acknowledged. In practice, the Holy See’s actions were entirely directed toward obtaining an amendment to the racial legislation from the Italian government, not toward opposing it in its entirety. And even here, there were differing positions regarding both the people involved and the timing. As we have already had occasion to note,[68] the harshest and most combative stance—especially before Mussolini’s true intentions were clear and when it was feared that the racial policy would lead to the introduction of divorce, the annulment of mixed marriages, and the sterilization of Jews—was that of the Pope. However, this stance was not shared by the entire College of Cardinals; and in any case, once the “Duce’s” true intentions became known, the Vatican’s opposition was essentially reduced to a single issue: that of the marriages of Jewish converts. Two reports from the ambassador to the Holy See to Ciano, dated October 7 and 10, 1938, speak volumes. The second reads:

As I have already had the honor of reporting, the recent deliberations of the Grand Council on the subject of racial defense have not, on the whole, been met with unfavorable reactions in the Vatican—referring to the reservation expressed even in the brief commentary in the *Osservatore Romano* of the 7th of this month regarding the implications that the new provisions might have for marriage as regulated by the Church.

Monsignor Montini, Substitute for Ordinary Affairs at the Secretariat of State, confirmed these impressions to me and, more specifically, that the Holy See’s primary—if not sole—concerns relate to marriages with Jewish converts.

It is significant that, having obtained partial satisfaction from the Italian government through the removal of Article 2 from the draft of what later became Decree-Law No. 1728 of November 17, 1938 (which, in practice, defined the marriage of a Jew—even a convert—to an Aryan as concubinage), in

the face of Mussolini's intransigence regarding its other demands (concerning above all Article 7), the Holy See not only consistently confined the dispute to strictly legal and concordat-related grounds but —despite Italy's violation of the Concordat—limited itself to a discreet and formal diplomatic protest, taking great care not only to avoid adopting, but even to avoid giving the slightest impression of, an attitude of extreme intransigence, as had been the case with the Catholic Action issue.

That said, here is how the Holy See's opposition manifested itself in practice

Holy See manifested itself in practice. The first official stance against fascist racism came from the Pope himself. On July 28, three days after the publication of the PNF's communiqué, Pius XI, while receiving students from the Collegio di Propaganda Fide, emphasized that racism was foreign to Italian tradition and criticized Italy for imitating Germany. As we have already noted in the first chapter when discussing the issue of Catholic Action, Mussolini, stung by this criticism, replied two days later by declaring that "even on the question of race, we will press ahead."[69] At the same time, Ciano informed the Apostolic Nuncio, Monsignor Borgongini-Duca, that if the Holy See persisted in its criticism, a clash would be inevitable; in this initial exchange of views, however, it was already evident that the Vatican's concerns centered primarily on the marriages of Jewish converts. In the weeks that followed, there were several other meetings between Ciano, Buffarini-Guidi, Borgongini-Duca, and Tacchi-Venturi. In this climate, amid mutual posturing—the most vehement of which came from afar (for Mussolini, one should recall in particular the section of his speech delivered in Trieste on September 18 devoted to the issue of race and the accusations leveled against him of having sought to imitate or even having yielded to Nazi influence[70])—two French newspapers, *L'Œuvre* and, above all, *Choc*, to speculate about the Pope's possible departure for France,[71] at the Grand Council meeting on October 6. Following the programmatic statements made there, the discussions entered the negotiation phase. On November 2, Buffarini-Guidi transmitted to Father Tacchi-Venturi the section of the draft law—drawn up to implement the Grand Council's resolutions—that concerned marriages. During the negotiations, which had some highly dramatic moments, the Holy See succeeded in having Article 2 of the draft (on cohabitation) struck down; however, it failed to secure the recognition in Article 7 (later Article 6 of Decree No. 1728) of marriages contracted by Jews who had converted to Catholicism. In vain did Pius XI declare that this violated the Concordat; in vain did he personally write to Mussolini and the king on November 4 and 5, respectively. The "Duce" did not even reply to him and, indeed, made it known that he "had the impression that the Vatican was pushing too hard" and that he was prepared, if the Pope insisted, to wage an all-out struggle against the Church; as for Victor Emmanuel, he merely replied that he had forwarded the letter he had received to the "Duce" (November 7). After the law was approved by the Council of Ministers on the 10th, on November 13 the Holy See submitted an official note of protest to the Italian Embassy regarding the violation of Article 34 of the Concordat; the note was followed the next day by an article ("Regarding a New Decree-Law") in the *Osservatore Romano* that reiterated its main arguments. In the weeks that followed, up until the Pope's death, there were further negotiations, which, however, came to nothing and continued to focus exclusively on legal and concordat-related matters.[72]

69 Three days later, in a short anonymous article published on August 3 by *Il Tevere* and reprinted the following day by *Il Popolo d'Italia* ("The Germans, the Five Days, and the Pope"), Mussolini returned to criticizing Pius XI's July 28 speech, this time accusing him of confusing the Germans—friends and allies of Italy during the Risorgimento—with the Austrians, Italy's oppressors.

The Grand Council was tasked with addressing the issue of race and determining the measures to be adopted at the first meeting of the October session, held on the 6th, with all its members present except

for De Vecchi. Mussolini had personally prepared the text of the declaration to be approved since early September. However, even before the meeting, several significant changes had already been made to it, including the deletion of the first sentence stating that the Grand Council endorsed “the ten propositions drawn up by the Fascist University Students,” that is, the manifesto of July 14. Further changes would be made during the meeting, prior to its approval.[73]

The most detailed account of the meeting is the one preserved in Bottai’s diary:[74]

Mussolini “attacks” with polemical fervor. It is an internal polemic, making its way through harsh words directed at likely opponents, both present and absent. “It is since 1908,” he states, “that I have been pondering this issue. This can be documented. One need only read, after all, my speech in Bologna (‘this Aryan and Mediterranean lineage of ours’) of April 3, 1921.” Then, he grabs some loose magazine pages: “Listen to what happened in a city in the Po Valley.” These are the pages of Nello Quilici’s article in *Nuova Antologia*, which demonstrate Jewish infiltration into the political, administrative, and cultural fabric of Ferrara. The “blow” is aimed directly at Balbo, who tries to maintain his composure. He alludes to the phenomenon in Trieste. He makes a brief reference to the Empire. “We must raise the issue, and do so clearly. If we do not take remedial action, we will lose the Empire.” He recalls the Goggiam cases; he cites episodes of coexistence

72 For these controversies and negotiations, see, in addition to R. de Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (op. cit.), pp. 285 ff., and the related documents in the appendix, pp. 547 ff. and 50 ff., A. Martini, *Studi sulla questione romana e la Conciliazione*, Rome 1963, pp. 175 ff. and 203 ff.; according to a report by Charles-Roux in Paris on September 6, 1938 (DDF, vol. II, XI, pp. 37 ff.), Father Tacchi-Venturi believed that, on the Jewish question, Mussolini had not acted on his own initiative but to satisfy a German demand.

At the session on October 18, De Vecchi reportedly hastened to declare “that had he been present at the meeting of the Grand Council of Fascism on October 6, 1938—which he did not attend due to official duties—he would have fully endorsed the decisions taken regarding the racial issue.” Thus the PNF’s “Foglio d’ordini” of October 26, 1938, p. 9.

of white men with Black women. Back to the Jews. “The remaining anti-fascism is of the Jewish variety. The attempts at hostile action against Hitler during his trip to Italy were due to Jews. It was a Jew, Giacomo Lumbroso of Florence, who compiled and distributed the leaflets inciting Italians to ‘demonstrate’ against Hitler, under the patriotic pretext of the Anschluss.” He’s talking about the Manifesto. “It was I, in effect, who dictated it.” He briefly describes the situation of the 470,000 Jews in Germany: they have their own Cultural Center, newspapers, magazines, and theaters. “There is, therefore, no such thing as widespread persecution. The Jews are segregated and isolated.” He mocks those who fear a backlash against us from Jewish finance. “It’s a lot of hot air. And even if it weren’t, we’d face it anyway.” He deplores the Church’s attitude. “I declare that this Pope is disastrous for the fate of the Catholic Church.”

After reading the “declaration” (“a document,” he says, “that can be defined as the ‘Charter of the Race’—more important than the ‘Charter of Labor’”), he gives the floor to Farinacci, who, noting the absence of De Vecchi—which he interprets as a deliberate abstention—lapses into clichés. Balbo and De Bono, speaking after him, attempt to soften the decisions by expanding the categories to be favored to include “combatants.” A lengthy debate ensues. Mussolini wavers, eager to back down a little.

I present my views on education. I argue for the need, following the measures already adopted, to stand

firm. “By readmitting Jews to the teaching profession,” I conclude, “we would lower the moral standard of our schools. They would hate us for having expelled them and despise us for having readmitted them.” My argument is accepted.

Among the “softliners”: Federzoni. Among the “hardliners”: Starace.

More brief, but nonetheless of interest—especially regarding Mussolini—are the entries in Ciano’s diary:[75]

Grand Council. The Jewish question. Balbo, De Bono, and Federzoni speak in favor. The others, against. Above all, Bottai, who surprises me with his intransigence. He opposes any softening of the measures. “They will hate us because we expelled them. They will despise us because we readmit them.” The Duce tells me during the breaks: “Discrimination doesn’t matter. We must raise the issue. Anti-Semitism is now ingrained in the blood of Italians. It will continue to circulate and develop on its own. Moreover, even if I am conciliatory tonight, I will be extremely strict in drafting the laws.”

The most persistent in calling for a softening of the planned measures was Balbo, who the following year, in his capacity as governor of Libya, successfully worked to prevent racial legislation from being extended to Libyan Jews as well.[76] Despite the softening that he, De

75 G. Ciano, Diary, op. cit., p. 193. Much more concise is E. De Bono’s diary (Q. 43, dated October 6, 1938): “The issue of race has not been properly addressed—Sectarianism. I spoke in defense of the combatants, supported by Balbo and Federzoni; opposed by: Starace, Buffarini, and Farinacci; but, in the end, my position prevailed. But there are so many cases to consider. Enough—we’ll see.”

G. Acerbo must also have raised some criticism of the historical-scientific aspect of the race issue in Italy, as it had been presented in the “scientists’” manifesto—it is unclear whether this occurred at this or another meeting of the Grand Council in October 1938. See ACS, Ministry of Popular Culture, b. 113, file 1, undated note from Acerbo to the minister, likely from late December 1939 or early January 1940.

Bono and Federzoni succeeded in introducing[77] the declaration, which was ultimately approved (the report in the PNF’s “Foglio d’ordini,” contrary to custom, did not specify whether the approval was unanimous or by acclamation); it was quite harsh. For foreign Jews, it (for the full text, see Document No. n in the Appendix) confirmed the ban on entry and the order of expulsion, with the sole exceptions for those over sixty-five years of age and those married to an Italian. As for Italian Jews, they were prohibited from belonging to the PNF, from owning or managing more than fifty hectares of land or businesses with more than one hundred employees, and from performing military service. The declaration also announced the imminent issuance of further measures regarding professional practice, on the basis of which virtually all activities would soon be prohibited to Jews. The declaration also established certain categories of deserving Jews (families of those killed in war and for the Fascist cause, combatants awarded medals for valor, the maimed and disabled, Fascists who joined the party in 1919–22 and in the second half of 1924, Fiume legionnaires, etc.) to whom the aforementioned civil restrictions were not to be applied in whole or in part. These were the so-called “discriminated”: together with their family members, approximately 6,500 individuals. Confirming what had already been decided in September, Jews were also excluded from teaching and were prohibited from attending schools not exclusively for Jews. In its final paragraphs, the declaration stated, finally, that “the possibility of granting, also to divert Jewish emigration from Palestine, a controlled immigration of European Jews to some area of Ethiopia” was not ruled out, and that “this eventuality and the other

conditions imposed on Jews" could be "revoked or tightened depending on the attitude that the Jewish community adopts toward Fascist Italy" and noted "with satisfaction" the establishment of chairs of racial studies at the major universities.

On the basis of this resolution, in the second half of that same month and in November, a series of legislative (the most important being Decree-Law No. 1728 of November 17, 1978) and administrative measures were enacted, establishing the new status of Jews in Italy.

As one might easily imagine, the reactions provoked by these measures—even though they were, following the publication of the July 14 manifesto, practically a foregone conclusion—were extremely intense abroad, even in circles that had until then been sympathetic to Italy. Apart from Germany and, to some extent, certain Danubian-Balkan countries closer to the Axis—where anti-Semitism was more or less prevalent—the only countries that welcomed them favorably were the Arab states.[79] In Italy, the impact was enormous. Despite the drops of anti-Semitic poison scattered over the previous two years and the massive support campaign by all mass media outlets and the party, the measures against the Jews found no sympathy among the vast majority of Italians—neither in and of themselves nor for the significance they were immediately attributed as a further step toward an alliance with Germany. Indeed, it can be said that it was precisely with the "race" campaign that Fascist propaganda failed spectacularly for the first time, and that for the first time, large numbers of Italians—who until then had been Fascists or, if you will, Mussolini supporters, but certainly not anti-Fascists—began to view Fascism and Mussolini himself in a different light. While at the highest levels of politics and administration, in journalism, and even in significant sectors of the cultural sphere, there were many instances of adherence to racial policy—almost always out of cowardice or opportunism—the prevalence of such cases diminished as one moved down the social ladder and through the ranks of political and administrative responsibility. And those who, at first dazed by the relentless barrage of propaganda, were not immediately moved to indignation by the measures were very often moved shortly thereafter, when they realized the tragedy—moral even before material—that these measures meant for the Jews, the profiteering to which the "discriminations" and "Aryanizations" soon became subject and, more generally, of the "arrangements" to which many Jews found themselves compelled to resort in order to escape the law and the arbitrariness of many of its enforcers. Not to mention the wealth of moral, intellectual, and entrepreneurial energy of which Italy was suddenly deprived. The press of the time speaks volumes. A careful reading of it allows us to trace, among the hundreds of articles and news items devoted to the "faults" of the Jews and to vaguely defined manifestations of popular "indignation" against them, direct and indirect references that clearly reveal how public opinion, for the most part, reacted negatively to racial policy. The campaign against "pietism," waged with such vigor by the press between November 1938 and January 1939, is the best evidence—provided by the regime itself—of the resistance and aversion that antisemitism encountered in the country, particularly among the Catholic masses.[80] That said, it must also be noted that, however serious it may have been, the rift caused by anti-Semitic legislation was, all things considered, from the standpoint of "consent," less decisive than is sometimes claimed. For a certain number of Italians, it undoubtedly served as a dramatic wake-up call that played a decisive role in bringing about their psychological detachment from the regime and, in some cases, their shift to the opposition. In this sense, its consequences were certainly greater than those resulting from the intervention in Spain, which had affected more limited circles or, in some ways, circles never penetrated by fascism, but had also strengthened support for the regime among certain Catholic circles that had viewed it as a crusade in defense of Christianity. For others, time, habituation, the paralyzing moral and material reality of the relationship between the country and the regime—as we outlined in the second chapter—the near-complete absence of cases of violence against Jews, and, at the same time, the realization that, when put to the test, the effects of persecution were or appeared less dramatic ("in the Italian style," as many

began to say) than had initially been thought; the small number of Jews, which meant that for most people the racial legislation remained something whose concrete consequences were not actually felt; and, finally, witnessing men—and here the responsibility of certain sectors of the cultural establishment and the clergy was undoubtedly heavy —respected and esteemed figures—ended up largely mitigating the initial trauma and transforming it into little more than a deep-seated unease, one of many sources of discontent and criticism, but not enough to turn what we have defined as the psychological detachment from the regime into dissent and outright opposition.

Having examined the domestic consequences of Hitler's visit, let us now consider its impact on foreign policy. The first, striking indication of how much the visit—contrary to appearances—had influenced Italian foreign policy was the speech delivered by Mussolini in Genoa on May 14, five days after Hitler's departure.

In London and Paris—as has been noted—the visit had been followed with the utmost attention and had not been viewed negatively. The French, in particular, had come to believe that the Italian-French rapprochement would be facilitated as a result. Nor had Blondel's first meeting with Ciano on May 11, after Hitler's departure, caused them to substantially change their opinion, even though the French chargé d'affaires had noted in Ciano "a significantly less conciliatory attitude"

than those he had displayed in late April.[81] In reality, as he had noted in his diary,[82] Ciano had refrained from taking an explicitly more negative stance solely to avoid the risk of jeopardizing the deliberations that the League of Nations was undertaking at that very moment to definitively resolve the Ethiopian question in accordance with the proposal put forward by England within the framework of the negotiations for the "Easter Agreements."

For Rome, the agreement with Paris was, in fact, no longer desirable. For Mussolini, this was primarily due to the irritation caused by rumors that the Axis was in trouble—rumors which, as mentioned, were circulating in virtually all the most serious Western political and journalistic circles—and to his desire to dispel them and, looking ahead, to strengthen relations with Germany instead. It is practically impossible to say exactly how he intended to bring about this strengthening. As a true realist, Mussolini secretly feared a genuine alliance and, deep down, did not want one; at the same time, the idea of such an alliance fascinated and appealed to the less rational part of his personality, drawing sustenance both from his ideological "agony" and the resulting conviction that France was on the verge of collapse, as well as from his irritation toward all those in Italy who opposed the Axis. More in line with his plans and his political "instinct" would have been a different kind of agreement, one that was less binding. He realized, however, that the Germans would not accept this and would use every means of pressure to secure the alliance. In this situation, unable to make a decision—in our view—Mussolini sought above all to buy time, hoping that the solution to the problem would arise naturally. Viewed in this light, it is clear that certain statements he made to Ciano and other associates regarding his desire to eventually reach a formal alliance with Germany cannot be taken literally, nor can those directed against the Germans; they are essentially valuable only for understanding his state of mind—both in general and, above all, in relation to specific events that particularly irritated him—and the inner conflict that tormented him and made him increasingly prone to outbursts against one side or the other, to sudden mood swings, and to yielding to the mood of the moment. The only thing certain for him was that there was to be absolutely no further attempt at a rapprochement with France. Everything stood in the way: foreign policy considerations, domestic political considerations, ideological considerations—not to mention his personal moods, which fluctuated on almost every other issue but not on this one.

For Ciano, the reasons were partly the same and partly different. Among these was “French stinginess”[83], which would have made any agreement with Paris, above all, of little benefit. But above all, there was the fact that Ciano—who, despite being the most tenacious supporter and architect of the Axis to the point of going so far as to, on February 14, 1938—just two days before writing, on Mussolini’s orders, the famous letter to Grandi seeking the agreement with London—to suggest to General Pariani “the usefulness of creating, as of now, a secret Italian-German War Committee”[84]—had until then opposed the alliance even to Mussolini, now, even though Hitler wanted it, desired it more than anyone else. Explaining the reason for this reversal of position (if indeed it was a reversal—for it cannot be ruled out that Ciano had always been personally inclined toward the alliance but had not shown it, being well aware of both Mussolini’s various plans and his deep-seated hostility toward it, as well as German reluctance) is not easy; however, some hypotheses are possible. Among them, the most likely—and the one that sums up all the others—is that Ciano saw the alliance with Germany above all as a way to definitively assert his role as heir apparent and to earn those personal merits that his intervention in Spain, given how things had turned out, the dangers he had faced, and the fact that Mussolini at one point had deemed it necessary to take direct control of the political management and turn to Grandi to save the situation—had not earned him. On the one hand, by championing the alliance and bringing it about himself (which would also explain the advice he gave Mussolini during Hitler’s visit not to accept the offer made to him by von Ribbentrop), he would have sidelined his strongest rivals for the succession, Balbo and Grandi—both of whom opposed it—and because he could have hoped to win the support of the pro-German faction.[85] On the other hand, because the alliance with Germany, in his plans, was supposed to enable him to achieve the personal success that Spain had denied him: namely, to allow him to occupy Albania.

Ciano had begun to consider the occupation of this country long before Hitler’s visit. As early as the 25th, “ibid.

85 In this regard, it should be added that it was precisely in the second half of 1938 that Ciano’s relations with Farinacci grew closer, and from various quarters (as we have seen in the case of De Bono) Farinacci’s name was often included among those of the “Ciano group.” In the same vein, it is worth recalling that when, after Costanzo Ciano’s death, the question of his succession as president of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations arose and it seemed that the choice was between Grandi and Farinacci, Ciano initially favored the latter, and when Starace pointed out to him the inappropriateness of this choice, he then turned to a third name, “a dull figure such as Teruzzi or Acerbo.” See G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 318.

In August 1937 (following the March agreements with Yugoslavia and his visit to Tirana in April), his diary contains an entry to this effect, confirmed by evidence that emerged during the postwar trial of F. Jacomoni, then Minister Plenipotentiary in Tirana and subsequently a key figure in his Albanian policy.[86] For this idea to take shape, however, the Anschluss had been necessary; in Ciano’s view, the occupation of Albania was to constitute Italy’s retaliation, all the more so given that there were grounds for fearing that German expansionism might extend even toward the most precious and traditional of Italy’s “hunting grounds.” On March 26, he had noted[87]:

I wonder if the general situation—and particularly the Anschluss—does not allow us to take a step forward toward the ever more complete domination of this country, which will be ours. It seems that Belgrade is eager for a military alliance: I believe that Albania could be the price to pay for it.

At the end of the following month, he traveled to Albania for King Zog’s wedding. Upon his return

from the trip, on April 30, he must have described to Mussolini Albania's mineral wealth and the German threat in such terms that the "Duce"—who was already extremely irritated, as we have seen, with the Germans over the South Tyrol issue (on the 24th he had vented his anger by threatening to rally the world and bring Germany to its knees "for at least two centuries")— had agreed with him on the "necessity of a comprehensive solution" and had told him "that just to have Albania," he was "even ready to go to war"88. Striking while the iron was hot, two days later Ciano wrote a report for Mussolini on his trip, entirely aimed at keeping alive Mussolini's interest and concern regarding German ambitions and at tickling and stirring the most sensitive chords of his personality; the report concluded with a detailed examination of the various ways to resolve the Albanian problem: "an ever-closer integration of the country through economic ties that ultimately play a role in the political sphere as well," "partition, in agreement with Yugoslavia and perhaps even with Greece," and "annexation through a personal union"—the option he clearly preferred—and to lay the groundwork for this, he put forward a series of proposals designed to prepare the ground89.

89 See the reproduction in *L'Europa verso la catastrofe*, op. cit., pp. 305 ff. To appreciate the care Ciano took in framing the problem in terms most likely to strike a chord with Mussolini, the following passage (p. 312) is typical: "Our prestige and our interests, both present and future, cannot tolerate encroachments by outsiders, nor would it be prudent to wait for the threat that is now barely taking shape to become clearly defined.

"Albania, which belonged to us whenever in history we sought and found in the Balkans the

On May 10, while traveling by train back to Rome from Florence, where they had bid farewell to Hitler, Ciano discussed the document with Mussolini, obtaining the "green light" for May of the following year. The relevant passage from Ciano's diary is extremely important for our discussion because it shows how, for the Foreign Minister (the "decisions" were his: Mussolini merely agreed to them, and his subsequent attitude suggests that for him it was merely a general approval, far from being binding) that Italy should enter into an alliance with Germany essentially to be able to occupy Albania. In fact, it reads90:

He agrees with my decisions and believes that the best month to act will be next May. This will give us a year for local and international preparations. Since a diplomatic crisis will arise and France and England will inevitably be against us, it is advisable to conclude the Pact with Germany. This will also serve to urge Yugoslavia to exercise great restraint. Yugoslavia, cut off from its Western and Eastern allies and sandwiched between Italy and Germany, will have to outline and adopt the stance that we adopted in the face of the Anschluss.

That very day, Ciano instructed Jacomoni to prepare a local action plan for him, and a week later he also discussed his plans with General Pariani." Everything further suggests that in the days that followed, he sought to keep Mussolini's interest in Albania alive, playing in particular on the German threat to that country.92

The Genoa speech emerged in this context. Mussolini had carefully prepared the text;93 it was intended to clarify Italy's position following Hitler's visit and to provide its "authentic" interpretation: a more reserved stance, yet—at least officially—in the natural course of our expansion; a stance that, even in recent times, while our right to it was recognized by foreigners, was abandoned due to the cowardice of our rulers, and which, over sixteen years of Mussolini's policies, has once again been bound to Italy by ties of great significance. This undertaking—the singular importance of which one must set foot on Albanian soil to fully appreciate—must be brought to completion at the appropriate time through the

annexation of Albania to Italy. Many reasons of every kind determine the necessity of such an event, the possibility—and perhaps the inevitability—of which the Albanians themselves are beginning to admit. Some of them—and not the worst among them—desire it. Under the Turkish imperial regime, the Albanian people were, at least in more recent times, the least rebellious of all those subject to the rule of the crescent. In the Sultan's army and administration, Albania's most enterprising sons found the career opportunities and prospects that their small, independent homeland cannot offer them today. The prospect of a return to similar opportunities within the Roman Empire would be very appealing—and I have been told this openly—to the best and brightest of Albanian youth. The others do not count. Or they count for much less."

not to alarm the British, not hostile toward France, and more open toward Germany. Upon ascending the podium shaped like a ship's prow, however, the "Duce" delivered a speech that was practically a different one, differing in several points from the prepared text: much more reserved toward France ("You will allow me to be cautious regarding conversations with France because they are currently underway. I do not know if they will reach a conclusion, not least because, in an extremely topical matter—namely, the Spanish Civil War—we are on opposite sides of the barricade"), more committed toward Germany ("The collaboration between the two revolutions, destined to leave their mark on this century, cannot but be fruitful... The words spoken on the night of May 7 at Palazzo Venezia... are something solemn and definitive in history") and even rude and haughty toward England ("The latest speech delivered by the British Prime Minister is an attempt to extricate himself from the quagmire of clichés and to recognize, in all its majesty and strength, this—which is our Italy, the Italy of Fascism and the Black Shirts. The agreement between London and Rome is an agreement between two empires, extending from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean")94.

Speculating on the reason for these shifts in tone and substance is pointless. According to Ciano, who was present, the crowd had carried him away95. It is more likely, however, that the change was due to a sudden change of heart, to one of his increasingly frequent mood swings: Ciano himself had noted the day before that while traveling to Genoa, Mussolini was "increasingly anti-French," irritated with Perth over his pressure in favor of the agreement with Paris and eager to deploy the Italian "volunteers" in the new offensive Franco was preparing. Whatever the reason, what is certain is that the speech caused astonishment and made a strong impression in all the capitals (including Berlin). The British, albeit in a courteous manner, made it known that they felt obliged to point out that—after Chamberlain in London and Halifax in Geneva had "praised" the "Easter Agreements"—the British government considered "that the expressions used by the Duce were not those expected in London" 97. Consequently, to make amends for the gaffe and prevent Chamberlain from finding himself in too much trouble with the opposition, Mussolini was forced to instruct Ciano to "apply a little balm to the wounds inflicted on the British in Genoa," taking advantage of a speech he was scheduled to deliver on June 2 in Milan.98 The Germans, officially, did not say a word. It is significant, however, that the economic negotiations between the two countries—which until then had been proceeding so slowly that Mussolini was beginning to worry about them—were quickly concluded (May 28), and a month later von Ribbentrop renewed his offer of a military alliance to Ambassador Attolico.99 As for the French, the Genoa speech came as a real shock to them. Bonnet immediately rushed to instruct Blondel to ask Ciano for assurances that the Italian side desired the continuation and success of the negotiations and to let him know that Paris, for its part, was convinced that they could very quickly lead to an agreement.[100] And a few days later, on May 22, he personally took a step in the same direction with the Italian chargé d'affaires in Paris.[101] All of this, however, was to no avail: Mussolini, after initially telling Ciano to delay "any communication to Blondel" until the results of the economic negotiations with the Germans were known, decided—once those negotiations concluded successfully—to break off negotiations with Paris, authorized Ciano to inform the British of his decision as well, and, as if that were not enough, he

ordered Starace to launch the aforementioned “wave of Francophobia” throughout the country ’02.

The breakdown of the Italian-French negotiations caused London great concern—both as a sign of a new Italian stance, because of the repercussions it might have on the situation in Spain, and, finally, because the British government, while not entirely agreeing with the way the French had conducted the negotiations with Rome, certainly could not exacerbate Paris’s concerns and give its opponents an excuse to speak of a crisis in Franco-British relations by implementing the agreements with Italy without Italy first fulfilling the obligations set forth therein (the withdrawal of the “volunteers”); but it also realized that, by failing to do so, the results it had set out to achieve through the agreements themselves risked being thwarted103. Another source of discontent and concern for the British—closely linked to the first—was the Italian stance on the Spanish question, which Perth had discussed repeatedly and unsuccessfully with Ciano in June104 and which, on July 2, culminated in Ciano’s delivery to the British ambassador of a harsh note (drafted by Mussolini[105]) in which he blamed British “intransigence” regarding the withdrawal of Italian “volunteers” for the failure of the “Easter Agreements” to take effect, when—according to the note—it was evident that withdrawal was impossible at that time, and thus there arose the consequent risk “of compromising the moral impact” of the agreements themselves; and, last but not least, the British were indirectly accused of attempting to establish a connection (“which was never raised either at the start of the Italian-British negotiations or during their course, and indeed was always formally ruled out”) between a possible Italian-French agreement and the implementation of the Italian-British one, and it was stated in no uncertain terms that, if this were true, there was “the risk of causing the Italian-British agreements to lapse as well,” although the threat was ultimately mitigated by a statement of great interest to us, given that it clearly shows how much Mussolini still cared at that time not to jeopardize his relations with London too much and to keep all doors open with it: “the resumption of Italian-French talks may eventually take place after the implementation of the agreements of April 16, but never before, for reasons so obvious that it is deemed unnecessary to elaborate”106. Despite these concerns and the undoubted further deterioration of Italian-British relations, the Sudetenland issue prevented a full-blown crisis from erupting between Rome and London for the time being. Faced with the escalating tension between Berlin and Prague, London had every interest in avoiding it and in trying not to lose its connection with Rome.

98 See G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 139 and 141; and for Ciano’s speech, *Relazioni internazionali*, June 11, 1938, p. 439. In his speech, Ciano strove above all to emphasize the importance of the Italian-British agreements for European peace and to demonstrate the unity of purpose in the policies of the two governments.

Blondel, taken completely by surprise by the speech, sought to explain it by citing Mussolini’s irritation with the international press—which had spoken of an Italy “humiliated” by the Anschluss—and the situation in Spain; he consoled himself by sending various reports to Paris on the surprise and discontent the speech had aroused among the Italian public. See ibid., pp. 729 ff., 737 ff., 807 ff., and 811 ff.

Despite the determination with which the Germans had resolved the Austrian question, in Rome little attention was paid to it for quite some time

105 See G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 153 and 135. On July 4, in Aprilia, during a brief speech to farmers before the threshing began, Mussolini accused the “so-called great demoplutocracies” (and thus, though he did not name it, England as well) of having hoped to force Italy to seek their economic

aid: “Their calculations have failed. But these enemies of Italy, who have revealed themselves for what they are beneath their ridiculous and abject facade, must be held up before the Italian people so that they may remember them at all times and in all circumstances, whether in peace or in war,” Mussolini, XXIX, pp. 120 ff.

Importance as the Czechoslovak crisis unfolded. While it was taken for granted that Hitler aimed to annex the Sudetenland to Germany, it was thought, however, that—as the Germans had hinted during the Führer’s visit—the issue would not become pressing for several years and that Berlin would, for the time being, limit itself to supporting the demands for autonomy put forward by the Sudeten Deutsche Partei and set forth in the eight points of the Karlsbad Program.[107] A typical example is the stance taken by Italy during the first phase of the crisis, in May. In Perth (throughout the first phase of the crisis and until it became convinced that Mussolini sided with the Germans, the British government kept Rome constantly informed of the evolution of its own positions), on the 21st and 22nd it presented the situation to Rome as “extremely grave—indeed, the gravest that has arisen since the end of the European war,” Ciano replied, convinced that, in his view, there were no grounds for dramatizing the situation.[108] He certainly remained essentially optimistic throughout the first week of August109 and probably until August 19, when the military attaché in Berlin informed him that intelligence gathered from German officers suggested that an attack on Czechoslovakia was inevitable and imminent (by the end of September) “°. Although his mood fluctuated, even Mussolini must have shared Ciano’s opinion for some time, especially since he was convinced that the Germans were unprepared and the British were “terrified” by the prospect of a conflict1". This explains why Rome underestimated and mishandled the Czechoslovak crisis, ultimately finding itself—without realizing it—in a dramatic dead end, a narrow and extremely simplistic approach (from the perspective of Italy’s tactical maneuvering between Berlin and London and its desire to humiliate Paris) that for a long time prevented it from realizing the gravity of the crisis and the obligations it imposed on Italy day after day.

During the first phase of the crisis, on May 26, as doubts had been raised abroad—and even in Germany—regarding Italy’s true stance, Ciano informed the German ambassador “that our position is no different from that presented to the Führer and Ribbentrop: indifference to the fate of Prague; complete solidarity with Germany.” That same day, in a moment of pessimism, Mussolini told his son-in-law that, in the event of war, he would immediately take the field alongside the Germans I12. In reality, Mussolini’s entire conduct (and that of Ciano behind him) during the months of the crisis casts serious doubt on the credibility of this statement, and there is ample reason to believe that von Ribbentrop was correct when, based on his talks in Rome, he concluded that in the event of a conflict, Italy would remain in a “state of alert,” would not hinder German action, but would not actively support it either n3. Throughout the crisis, even during its most dramatic moments, Rome’s diplomatic initiative was virtually nonexistent, as if it were intent on avoiding any binding commitments. In May, agreements were reached between Alfieri and Goebbels to align the rhetoric of the Italian and German press with that of the French press. However, even though the first doubts about Germany’s true intentions had begun to surface in the minds of Mussolini and Ciano “4,” nothing was done to clarify them. A month later, when, as mentioned, von Ribbentrop again spoke with Ambassador Attolico about an alliance, specifying—evidently to pave the way—that in the event of a conflict provoked by German action in Czechoslovakia, “the commitment would not apply to Italy” 1, Mussolini had Ciano propose a meeting between the two foreign ministers in Como to discuss the offer. But he also specified that “we will have to explain to the Germans that I will enter into the alliance when it is popular; I am working to make it so.” This raises the suspicion that the meeting was intended less to discuss the alliance than to clarify German intentions regarding Czechoslovakia116. However, when, in July, von Ribbentrop indicated that he wished to drop the proposal for a meeting and the Prince of Hesse, whom he had sent to Rome, brought no real new information, nothing was done to obtain the “desired” intelligence.

Another month passed, and when the reports transmitted by the military attaché and then by Attolico[17] left little room for doubt, Ciano's initial reaction was, in our view, revealing:

According to R. Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London, 1947), p. 373—which essentially presents the British prime minister's point of view—Mussolini's desire was not so much to support a German victory as to reach a diplomatic settlement from which Hungary and Poland could benefit.

Almost simultaneously, an internal note from the Quai d'Orsay described the Italian position as "extremely ambiguous": despite its apparent disinterest and hostility toward Czechoslovakia, "it is impossible to predict Rome's attitude in the event of a general conflict." DDF, Series II, X, p. 208.

Politically, we have been told nothing [by the Germans]. We should therefore maintain the positions we held in May, when we were assured that any recourse to force was out of the question, at least for a few years.

Immediately afterward, it was decided to take direct action regarding Berlin:

I am giving Attolico written instructions to go to Ribbentrop and request precise information on what the Reich Government intends to do in Czechoslovakia, for the purpose of "being able to take our timely measures at the western border." This communication will have a significant impact on the Germans because it explains how far we are willing to go. In reality, the information from Berlin increasingly points to an impending crisis over the Czech question. Will the conflict be contained, or will France set the powder keg ablaze? In such an eventuality, we have no alternative but to immediately align ourselves, by all means, with Germany. The Duce is determined to act. Hence the need to know the facts in a timely and complete manner.

It would finally seem to be a clear stance, but Ciano does not mention that he has declined a German invitation to attend the now imminent National Socialist Congress in Nuremberg (what better opportunity to clarify all the issues directly?)1,9 nor that, a few days later, the Italian press's fierce campaign against France (over Spain)—which had been going on for about three months and had just reached its peak in those very days—suddenly subsided so abruptly as to astonish the French themselves,2°. And then there are Ciano's other notes from August 29 and September 2 and 3, which are anything but confirmation of a decision—by then taken for granted—to participate in a potential conflict that was unwanted and that it would have been absolutely impossible to justify in the eyes of the Italian people 12', and instead lend credence to Cardinal Pacelli, who at that very time was convinced—as reported by the French ambassador to the Holy See,[22]—that Italy would not follow Germany into war. Under the date of August 29, Ciano wrote[123]:

with the British. See DBFP, vol. III, II, p. 136. A few days later (on September 9), Blondel expressed the same opinion, adding that Italy's objective was to drive a wedge between England and France. Ibid., pp. 102 ff. and 103 ff.

On the Czech question, which is becoming increasingly pressing, the Duce anticipates that the Germans will incite the Sudeten Germans to act: an uprising will break out within the country. If Beneš reacts with violence, Hitler will have the opportunity to carry out an intervention that, in the eyes of the world, will have a plausible justification. France is unlikely to take action. It is not prepared for war in

general, much less for a war of aggression. The British will do everything in their power to avert a conflict, which they fear more than any other country in the world.

And four days later124:

The Duce is uneasy because the Germans are revealing very little about their plans regarding Czechoslovakia. He orders me to speak with Assia. He wants to know how far Germany intends to push things, and to what extent and in what way it expects our assistance. Attolico, in his reports, does not, for the time being, provide any decisive information: he is personally opposed to our becoming too deeply involved.

Prunas sends a telegram regarding a meeting between Bonnet and the German ambassador in Paris. The terms are very precise: France, England, and the Soviets would intervene immediately, with American support. Will such language have a useful effect on Germany, or has Hitler not gone too far to back down now?

And finally, on September 3, 125:

Attolico had a meeting with Ribbentrop. No new information. If there is a provocation, the Germans will attack. Nothing else has been decided by the Führer. It is in our best interest not to press for further answers. It is clear that the Germans do not want to draw us into the conflict. This leaves us with full freedom of action in any eventuality.

In fact, until the publication on September 9 of "Diplomatic Information" No. 19 126, Rome did not take a position. And even with the "Diplomatic Information," rather than truly taking a position, Rome merely sought to sow discord between London and Paris; having been informed four days earlier by the French that they had mobilized reservists along the Rhine but not in the Alps, Rome in turn wished to make it known that it had not taken any military measures of its own. All of this took place in the context of a statement that did indeed open with a reference to the Axis, but which, regarding this specific issue, centered entirely on reaffirming support for the eight points of the Karlsbad Program and, therefore, for resolving the Sudetenland question within the framework of Czechoslovakia.

As Blondel127 had immediately predicted, however, this position seemed too moderate to Berlin (on September 12, Hitler delivered his famous speech at the Nuremberg Congress; while it did not yet raise the issue of the Sudetenland's annexation to the Reich, it made it clear that a solution based on autonomy was insufficient for Germany), so much so that the Germans immediately proposed a secret meeting at the Brenner Pass between Hitler and Mussolini to be held before September 25." For the first time, Mussolini—who had simultaneously received from Grandi an invitation from Chamberlain to intervene with Hitler in a moderating capacity, which must have confirmed his conviction that the British absolutely did not want a conflict, and who had been informed by Attolico that German action had most likely been scheduled for the end of the month—let Berlin know "that if at this moment they need action in their favor, he 'is ready to go a step beyond the latest Diplomatic Bulletin'" but that prior commitments prevented him from meeting with the Führer before the beginning of October 12."

From that moment on, the "Duce's" involvement in the Czechoslovak affair undoubtedly became more active, even frantic. On September 14, "Diplomatic Information" No. 20,29—which he had personally drafted—was published; after describing Hitler's speech from two days earlier as "a powerful contribution to clarifying the Sudeten problem," stated that—since it was not in the interest of Europe and the world, but only of the "Bolsheviks of the East and West," to unleash a war—the only solution

was now to frame the issue “in concrete terms as the right to self-determination, which cannot be denied to the Sudeten Germans.” The note was followed the next day by the publication in *Il popolo d’Italia* of an anonymous article—yet so typically Mussolinian in style that everyone in Italy and abroad recognized its author. For several weeks, Lord Runciman had been sent by Chamberlain and Halifax to Czechoslovakia as an unofficial mediator between the Sudeten Deutsche Partei and the government in Prague. The article was written as a “Letter to Runciman”: it elaborated on what had been outlined the previous day in the “Informazione diplomatica” note, proposing a series of plebiscites “not only for the Sudeten Germans, but for all nationalities that request them” (that is, for the Poles and Hungarians of Czechoslovakia) and called on England to support the proposal, making it clear that it would never go to war to preserve that “monstrous fiction of a state” that was Czechoslovakia:130

At Versailles, a Bohemia—a historical name—was to be created with a homogeneous Czech population; instead, they sought to inflate a Czechoslovakia—an entity that never existed!—and created an artificial state that, from its very inception, carried within it the seeds of its weakness and dissolution... After Hitler’s speech, here comes the best part for you, Mr. Runciman. You can take action and accomplish something that will go down in history. The time for compromise is over. Karlsbad is a thing of the past. Beneš, as an old parliamentarian, has lost the race. You, Mr. Runciman, must simply propose to Beneš a plebiscite not only for the Sudeten Germans but for all nationalities that request it. Will Beneš reject the plebiscite? In that case, you could let him know that England will think seven times before going to war simply to preserve a fictitious state that is monstrous even in its geographical shape—so much so that it has been called, at various times, the “crocodile state” or the “sausage state.” If London makes it known that it will stand firm, no one will move. The game here is absolutely not worth the candle, even if it is inserted into the Masonic candelabra of the Grand Orient. If Hitler were to demand the annexation of three and a half million Czechs, Europe would have reason to be alarmed. But Hitler is not thinking of that. The author of this letter can tell you, in confidence, that if he were offered three and a half million Czechs, Hitler would politely but resolutely decline such a gift. The Führer is concerned with and cares only for the three and a half million Germans—and them alone. No one can dispute that right. No one can oppose the fulfillment of that duty. Least of all we Italians, who have a history in this matter.

Take heart, Mr. Runciman. Propose the plebiscite—or rather, the plebiscites. It is a magnificent and delicate task. There are compact areas where a plebiscite would mean outright annexation to our brother nations; conversely, there are areas where the races have become terribly intermingled, making a clean break impossible. Here, the system of so-called equal cantonalization—or something of the sort—could come into play. Which would, incidentally, be in keeping with democratic tradition.

Once the plebiscite zones are established, the date, procedures, and oversight—which could be international in nature, as was already done with satisfactory results in the Saar plebiscite—would remain to be determined.

On the evening of the very same day the article appeared, news spread that Chamberlain had requested a meeting with Hitler and that the two politicians were to meet the following day. As soon as he was informed, Mussolini told Ciano151:

There will be no war. But this marks the end of British prestige. In two years, England has been knocked down twice.

In reality, events soon seemed to be heading in an entirely different direction—a path that Mussolini and Ciano had not foreseen and down which they would not have wanted Italy to be dragged, but

which, given the narrow-minded and ambiguous way in which they had managed their policy up to that point, had become very difficult to avoid at this stage, unless they were to lose face. At the Berchtesgaden meeting, Hitler demanded, in no uncertain terms, the annexation of the Sudetenland. Chamberlain replied "that he could personally declare his acceptance of the principle of the separation of the Sudeten region," but that he had to consult his government, Lord Runciman, and the French. Having convinced the French government and forced the Czechoslovak government to yield through an ultimatum (if it chose to resist, it would not receive Anglo-French aid), Chamberlain met with Hitler again on September 22 and 23, this time in Godesberg. To his great surprise, however, Hitler had become more intransigent: arguing that too long a delay would give the Czechs too many opportunities for "evasion," he demanded that the territories with a German majority be cleared (without any destruction or removal of equipment, facilities, or property) by Czechoslovak troops and occupied by German troops by October 1; that areas with a large German minority be subject to a plebiscite in November, with the right to participate granted to all those who had resided there as of October 28, 1918, or had been born there before that date (approximately 580,000 people who had emigrated to Germany) and that plebiscites also be held for the Poles in the Teschen district and for the Hungarians in southern Slovakia. Faced with these new, incredible demands, Chamberlain had returned to London, but not without first pointing out to Hitler with the utmost force the risks that peace would face if he insisted on them. In response, Hitler informed him on September 27 that the following day at 2:00 p.m., Germany would proceed with general mobilization. At this point, several matters were still shrouded in mystery, first and foremost, what the USSR's stance would be. The USSR had been bound to Czechoslovakia since 1935 by an alliance that provided for assistance only if France fulfilled its commitments; however, this was not easily enforceable, as the USSR shared no land border with either Czechoslovakia or Germany, and both Poland and Romania had refused to allow the passage of Soviet troops. One thing, however, was certain: war was now just around the corner, and France and England seemed unable to back down any longer.

During these two weeks, Palazzo Chigi had remained virtually inactive. One almost gets the impression that its main concern was to maintain contact with the Poles and, above all, with the Hungarians, and to work, on the one hand, to ensure that Germany was not the only one to benefit from the crisis,132 and, on the other hand, to prevent Warsaw and Budapest from igniting the powder keg. On September 22, Ciano had received the Hungarian representative in Rome, who had reaffirmed his country's claims to the Czechoslovak territories inhabited by Hungarians. Ciano, in turn, had reaffirmed Italy's support but had urged the Hungarians "to follow and support the German or Polish initiative, but not to be the first to attack, so as to prevent the bonds of the Little Entente from coming into play again"133. To keep the Hungarians on his side, Roma had probably also made them some fairly binding promises in the event of a conflict in which the USSR might also participate. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain their request, on September 24, to the military attaché, Colonel Palletta, that a certain number of fighter squadrons (fourteen in all) be sent urgently to their aid for the defense of Budapest and two industrial centers—and, above all, that Palletta forward the request to Rome without any comment (except to advise, for the time being, to send only one group) and also specify the airport where the planes were to land and where specialized personnel and the first essential supplies were to be dispatched.[134] Toward the others—and especially the British—Palazzo Chigi's attitude had been ambiguous and evasive. As recently as September 22, in Perth—where it had been made clear to him that England did not desire war, but that "it will wage war if Germany fails to stop where moderation dictates"— Ciano had advocated a "comprehensive" solution to the Czechoslovak problem—"namely, that Hungary and Poland, too, receive due satisfaction"—but had revealed nothing about Italy's position in the event of a conflict.[135] And this despite the fact that a week earlier, while not officially committing himself, he had hinted that in the event of war, Italy would side with Germany.[1]M. The same inactivity had characterized the military command, which had only recently decided to proceed with a reform of the

divisional structure, leading various foreign observers to be skeptical about Italian participation in a possible conflict in 1937. It was not until September 25 that the mobilization of 25,000 specialists was decided, followed two days later by the first concrete measures to ensure “armed neutrality in the initial phase”1M. On the other hand, from September 18 to 26, Mussolini had traveled the length and breadth of Veneto and Venezia Giulia, delivering a series of speeches in Trieste (on the 18th), Gorizia and Udine (on the 20th), Treviso (on the 21st), Padua and Belluno (on the 24th), Vicenza (on the 25th), and Verona (on the 26th).

This request might, perhaps, corroborate the information that, after Munich, Daladier conveyed to L. Blum and J. Moch—namely, that in the days immediately preceding the resolution of the crisis, the Soviets had sent 200 bomber aircraft to Czechoslovakia (via Romania). See J. Moch, *Recontres avec... Leon Blum*, op. cit., pp. 254 ff.

It is not easy to say with certainty what the purpose of this extremely intense oratory activity by the “Duce” was (the prior commitments for which he had “had to” decline, for the time being, the proposal to meet with Hitler). According to the French chargé d’affaires in 1939, it was to reassure, convince, and galvanize the Italians and get them to accept his policy. According to Marshal Caviglia1W, however, Mussolini wanted to give the impression that he was ready to enter the war (“while he knows perfectly well that Italy is not in a position to do so”) and, through this threat, help Germany “secure the Sudetenland without bloodshed.” These two explanations cannot be dismissed out of hand, but in our view, they are certainly no more credible than another: namely, that Mussolini wanted the power, day by day, depending on how the international situation evolved, to have his say and comment on the developments of the crisis in a way that would ensure his positions received wide domestic and international attention, yet at the same time, would not be entirely official. Such intense and spectacular oratory is, in fact, difficult to explain solely on the basis of domestic political considerations.

Of all these speeches,[141] the most important—both politically and, above all, for understanding Mussolini’s position—was the first one, delivered in Trieste. Ideologically linking back to what he had written in the Letter to Runciman (“If London makes it known that it is standing firm, no one moves”), Mussolini—after reiterating his argument that only plebiscites could offer a peaceful solution to the Czechoslovak crisis and expressing the hope that any conflict would be “limited and circumscribed”—said:142

But if this were not to happen and a universal alignment were to form for or against Prague, let it be known that Italy’s position has already been chosen.

The whole meaning of the speech—as Blondel immediately pointed out to Bonnet[143]—lay in that word “universal”: Italy would enter the war alongside Germany only if England also entered the war. And that

140 E. Caviglia, Diario, op. cit., p. 188. Also on the same date (September 27, 1938), Caviglia wrote: “Mussolini speaks every day, sometimes in two different places on the same day. He repeats himself and often contradicts himself. He travels with a claque that doesn’t always know when to applaud. They call him ‘the chariot of Thespis.’”

There is no doubt whatsoever that this was the meaning of the speech. On the train, traveling toward Trieste, Mussolini had been explicit with Ciano:[144]

“I have made the decisions,” he had told him. “If the conflict breaks out in Germany, Prague, Paris, and Moscow, I will remain neutral. If Great Britain intervenes, broadening the conflict and giving it an ideological character, then we will throw ourselves into the furnace. Italy and Fascism could not remain neutral.”

And even in these words, if one wishes to fully grasp the significance of Mussolini’s position, one must not overlook the decisive importance of that ideological aspect. For Mussolini, if England had entered the war, it would have done so not out of a political choice but an ideological one. The “Duce” was convinced that Chamberlain and the Conservative majority did not want war over Czechoslovakia. If they had been drawn into it, that would have meant they had decided to go to war against Hitler and totalitarianism. Only in this case would Italy’s place have been alongside Germany, because it would have been evident that—once matters were framed in ideological terms—there would no longer be any possibility of agreement between Rome and London; the pendulum would have stopped swinging, and all of Mussolini’s political projects, beginning with that of a new “Four-Power Pact,” would no longer have had any chance of being realized. At that point, all that would remain for Fascist Italy would be the gamble of the ultimate test.

There is little to say about the other speeches. In them, Mussolini essentially did nothing more than comment on the ups and downs of the crisis during those days, continuing to insist on the need for a “comprehensive” solution—that is, one not limited solely to the Sudetenland, but one that would also satisfy Warsaw and Budapest (his interest in positioning himself, in a sense, as impartial—in not allowing Germany to completely dominate Poland andHungary, and to strengthen the governments of these two countries in the long run), to express his support for Chamberlain’s efforts to steer the ship of his political initiative “toward the harbor of peace,” and to emphasize that, in any case, “the Italian people, after four years of the most severe trials,” were ready “as never before to face those to come”145. Only two specific statements are worth recalling. One, from the Padua speech[146]—“If there are in Italy any of those whom I call the men who perpetually hide behind the shutters, those whom I morally call the bourgeoisie, I declare that they will be immediately put out of action”—reveals how Mussolini was aware of the fears and hostility that the position he had taken was arousing in the country. Another was in his speech in Verona—his last, delivered on September 26—when the situation already seemed to be hurtling toward a tragic conclusion: following the failed meeting in Godesberg, Prague had mobilized, Paris had called up over 75,000 reservists, and London was on the verge of declaring a state of emergency and mobilizing its fleet. In these critical circumstances, Mussolini said:[147]

Events may unfold along these lines: there are still a few days left to find a peaceful solution. If one is not found, it will take a nearly superhuman effort to prevent a conflict.

If it does break out initially, it may be contained.

I still believe that Europe will not want to lay waste to itself, will not want to burn itself in order to cook the rotten egg of Prague.

Europe faces many needs, but certainly the least urgent of all is to increase the number of mass graves that are springing up so frequently along national borders.

However, we must anticipate a third phase: one in which the nature of the conflict will be such that it will directly involve us. And then we will have no hesitation—nor will we allow any.

I must also add that the succession of these three phases may be extraordinarily rapid.

As can be seen, Mussolini was still trying not to close all doors before him and was, in effect, repeating once again what he had said in Trieste: as long as the conflict remained “localized”—that is, as long as England had not decided to participate in it—he would remain outside of it.

Despite his hopes and Machiavellian maneuvers, by the morning of September 28 the situation had become irreparably compromised even for Mussolini. At 2:00 p.m., Hitler’s ultimatum would expire, and there was no longer any reasonable basis to believe that, in the face of German aggression, England would not take action. As early as the 26th, Ciano—having learned that Hitler had rejected the latest British proposal—had noted in his diary: “It is war. May God protect Italy and the Duce”I48. And in anticipation of this, as early as the 25th, Mussolini had spoken to him about the advisability of a meeting with von Ribbentrop “to clarify the terms of Italian intervention,” a meeting that was then scheduled two days later, for the 29th in Munich, with the participation of their respective military leaders 149, and he himself had begun giving instructions to General Valle to plan the withdrawal of the Legionary Air Force from Spain—both to make it available at home and in Libya, and because Franco had made it known that in the event of a European conflict, he would declare neutrality150.

Suddenly, as the fateful hour was drawing near, a dramatic turn of events occurred that no one had anticipated. Here is how Ciano recounted in his diary the dramatic sequence of events on that September 28, 1938 151:

1:00 a.m. Four hours remain before hostilities break out, when Perth calls to request an audience. I receive him immediately. He says—and he is very moved—that Chamberlain is appealing to the Duce for a friendly intervention during these hours, which he considers the last useful hours to save peace and civilization. He reiterates the guarantee that England and France have already offered regarding the cession of the Sudetenland. I ask Perth whether I should consider this démarche an official invitation to the Duce to assume the role of mediator. Yes. Then there is no time to lose: the offer deserves to be taken into consideration. I tell Perth to wait for me at Palazzo Chigi. I go to see the Duce. He immediately agrees that it is impossible to issue a flat refusal to Chamberlain’s request. He telephones Attolico: “Go to the Führer and tell him—given that I will stand by his side in any event—that I advise postponing the start of hostilities by 24 hours. In the meantime, I reserve the right to study what can be done to resolve the problem.” I return to Palazzo Chigi. I inform Perth that hostilities are set to begin today and confirm that we stand with Germany. His face is trembling, and his eyes are red. When I add, however, that the Duce has accepted Chamberlain’s request and proposed a 24-hour postponement, he bursts into laughter mixed with sobs and rushes back to his embassy. Shortly afterward, he requests another audience. He brings a message from Chamberlain to the Duce and a copy of the one addressed to Hitler: a concrete proposal for a four-party conference with a commitment to reach a radical solution to the Sudeten problem within seven days. It cannot be refused: if Hitler were to do so, he would incur the hatred of the world and bear full responsibility for the conflict. Palazzo Venezia: The Duce decided to support the British request, especially since the Führer, in accordance with Mussolini’s wishes, has [issued] a telegram with instructions. I spoke with Perth to inform him, and with Attolico to give him directives. Naturally, I canceled the meeting with Ribbentrop and Keitel, which had been scheduled for yesterday.

From a phone call, it appears that Blondel is also preparing to take “a step.” Not at all: we do not want France to interfere. The whole situation would take on a different aspect, and the Germans would rightly prick up their ears. I call Perth: “I understand that France is preparing to meddle. I warn you that

any move by Blondel would be absolutely counterproductive. Make sure it doesn't happen. Our work would be in jeopardy." He agrees and pledges to act according to my request.

3:00 p.m. Attolico calls to say that Hitler is in full agreement, with a few minor reservations.

151 Ibid., pp. 185 ff. For a reconstruction of the day's events regarding the ambassador's actions in Berlin, see M. Magistrati, *L'Italia a Berlino*, op. cit., pp. 248 ff. For the English version, see DBFP, vol. III, II, pp. 588, 590, 600, and especially pp. 641 ff.; for the French version, see DDF, vol. II, XI, pp. 662 ff. (Nothing is mentioned in the memoirs of J. Blondel, *HI de la carrière. Récit d'un diplomate 1911–1938*, Paris 1960). For Roosevelt's message, see FRUS, 1938, I, pp. 677 and 689.

He does, however, set one condition: the presence of Mussolini, whom he considers the only guarantee. The Duce agrees. We will depart at 6:00 p.m. this evening to arrive at 10:30 a.m. in Munich, the venue of the Conference.

I return from the Duce with the American Ambassador, bearing a very belated message from Roosevelt. I remain alone with the Duce. He says: "As you can see, I am moderately happy, because, albeit at a high price, we could have dealt with France and Great Britain once and for all. We now have overwhelming proof of this."

At 6:00 p.m., we depart. Italy's unanimous vote is with us.

Bottai has left us in his diary a description of the departure for Munich that is worth more than any long speech[152]:

Yesterday, at half past five in the afternoon, we were summoned in a hurry to the station. Mussolini was leaving to meet with Hitler, Daladier, and Chamberlain in Munich. A thick crowd of onlookers, kept at bay. Starace, among ministers, party officials, and journalists, stood under the platform canopy with the air of a ringmaster. I approach him. He makes a vulgar gesture with his hands alluding to Mussolini's "luck." Perhaps he means the luck of having threatened war without the inner conviction of having to or wanting to wage it—indeed, in truth, fearing it—and of now being called upon to save the peace. Mussolini arrives with Galeazzo. The atmosphere is gray and lifeless; not even our monotonous, mechanical chant—"Duce! Duce 1!"—joined by the people around us, lifts the mood. Spirits, perhaps, are lifted a little—these spirits, constrained by the organization. Mussolini is in civilian clothes; Galeazzo is in the uniform of a Militia general. A man and a suit; a man deep in thought, his face somber, simple, ultimately, in the inner anxiety of the moment; a suit, inside which is a vain and cunning big boy, moving with the swaying motion of a hot-air balloon. Alfieri and Starace are in a bad mood because they, too, cannot climb onto the train behind the Leader. This time, the Ciano-Alfieri-Starace-Sebastiani quartet isn't working. Mussolini heads straight for the train. The situation seems to irritate him. Once aboard his car, he leans out and pulls back nervously from the window, hastening the departure with sudden hand gestures.

At this point, before moving on to discuss the Munich Conference, it is necessary to take a step back and examine how Chamberlain's appeal came about. For a long time, it was believed that the British prime minister's decision to approach Mussolini[153] had arisen as a sort of last-ditch effort—one in which Chamberlain himself had very little confidence—to leave no stone unturned in averting the now-imminent war. If "external" influences played a role, these have been seen in never-clearly-specified French pressure (which did exist, but came after the instructions to Perth to make contact with Ciano), in Roosevelt's messages of September 26 to Hitler, Benes, Daladier, and Chamberlain himself on

September 26, and to Mussolini on September 27, and above all in the request made by Perth to Halifax on the 27th to be authorized to tell Ciano that the British government hoped Mussolini would use his influence to persuade Hitler to accept Chamberlain's latest proposals.[154] For years, no one ever believed that the British prime minister's decision had been influenced by Italian initiatives, of which, moreover, there was no news whatsoever. Nor should this come as a surprise.

Although relations between Rome and London had been formally cordial in the spring and summer of 1938—and the British side had made efforts to make them appear better than they actually were—in reality, the Italian stance toward France, as well as in the Spanish and Czechoslovakian crises, had gradually eroded Chamberlain's confidence in the effectiveness of the "Easter Agreements" and, with it, his personal regard for Mussolini's political realism. As recently as early July, the Prime Minister had defended his policy toward Rome to Daladier, writing to him[155]:

I shall begin my reply by reiterating that I am certain you have never doubted that I regard Anglo-Italian solidarity as the cornerstone of our foreign policy and that I would never allow myself to be swayed from this conviction by the desire to establish friendly relations with other countries... You will recall what I told you in London: that in reaching an agreement with Italy, our intention went far beyond simply clarifying the various sources of suspicion and irritation that existed between us. We regarded the Anglo-Italian agreement as a significant step toward our ultimate goal, namely, a general European appeasement. It follows from this view that, unless that agreement is followed by a similar reduction in the tension between Italy and France, we would have made little progress toward our goal. We therefore have every reason and every intention to use all the influence we can exert to achieve that ultimate goal... I do not rule out the possibility of an [Italian] intention to weaken the Paris-London axis, but there are other explanations [for the Italian stance on the Spanish question and toward France] that seem more likely to me. The revelation of such a plan, whether now or later, would immediately and to a considerable extent destroy the cordiality of Anglo-Italian relations, and this would be widely unpopular in Italy. Furthermore, the result would inevitably be to make Italy more dependent than ever on Germany's goodwill, and, however good their relations may be, I cannot believe that such a situation would be welcome to the Italian government.

In the weeks that followed, however, the gradual intensification of the Italian press campaign against France and Rome's ambiguous stance in the face of the resurgence of the Czechoslovak crisis had dealt a severe blow to these hopes and intentions. If we add to this the fact that, as has been rightly noted,[156] "the line of thinking bequeathed by Eden persisted within the Foreign Office and the Cabinet, which continued to view Italian policy as purely opportunistic and aimed essentially at siding with the winning side in the coming conflict," it becomes clear why—in the absence of any other factors—Chamberlain's move regarding Mussolini on the morning of September 28 was regarded by everyone for years, depending on one's assessment of Chamberlain's character and policies, as either an act of desperation or one of great responsibility. An act, in any case, in which others had played virtually no part—and certainly not Italy. Only recently has it been possible to correct this belief, shed light on the background of the affair, and establish the role Italy played in it; not in the persons of Mussolini and Ciano, who became involved only when Perth telephoned the latter on the morning of September 28 and who remained completely in the dark about the background to the affair, but in that of Grandi, who was, if not exactly the deus ex machina, its architect.[157]

During the Czechoslovak crisis, Grandi had been left by Rome without instructions and practically in the dark about what Mussolini and Ciano were thinking. On a couple of occasions—and in particular in two reports, one dated May 27 and the other June 25—he had sought, by illustrating the difficulties Chamberlain was facing with the opposition and with a faction of his own party, to make Ciano

understand the gravity of the deterioration taking place in Italian-British relations,[158] but to no avail. Nor had his efforts met with a better outcome in August, when he had been in Italy on vacation. Mussolini, who was launching the "racial campaign" and knew Grandi to be opposed to both it and any further rapprochement with Germany, had not even been willing to receive him.[159] Upon returning to his post and as the Czechoslovak crisis worsened, Grandi had pointed out to Ciano the shift in attitude —psychological even before political—that was taking shape in England regarding the possibility of a conflict. But Rome, once again, showed no signs of understanding. A few days later, on September 12, Ball had forwarded to him Chamberlain's request for Mussolini to intervene to moderate Hitler. Rome, however, had not responded to this request either. Three days later, Chamberlain met with Hitler in Berchtesgaden. Up to that point, Grandi had taken no initiative. As he would write on September 30 in a lengthy forty-one-page "note" intended to "aid my future recollection of these two weeks—the most dramatic since the end of the Great War—and also, it must be said, for my mission as Ambassador in London" 16°, up to this point, while awaiting instructions from Rome—which never arrived—I never considered myself authorized either to go to the Foreign Office or, as I had previously written to Ciano, to try to meet with Chamberlain or Halifax. I knew full well that Ciano wanted nothing more than for me to remain inactive. Reading the Italian newspapers during those days gave me this impression. For a week, the Italian newspapers continued to print in bold type that the British Ambassador in Rome was about to return immediately from England to meet with Ciano. Lord Perth, on the other hand, was in Scotland. A few insignificant contacts between the British Chargé d'Affaires in Rome and Ciano had been reported, on instructions from above, in bold print in the Roman newspapers, with the aim of leading the Italian public to believe that Italy, too, was "in on" these negotiations—which was absolutely not true. On the other hand, it was evident that Rome did not want the Italian Embassy in London to appear to be doing anything that might give the impression that contacts between the Italian and British governments were taking place through the Italian Embassy in London.

Now, faced with the new development of the Berchtesgaden meeting, Grandi had once again decided to act on his own initiative. On September 15, he had sent Dingli to Ball to let Chamberlain know that he considered it "appropriate, if not necessary," that Mussolini not be left out of the negotiations.

I insisted—he would write in his "note" of September 30—on the benefit to Great Britain of the Fascist government being kept informed of events directly by the British government, rather than allowing Rome to be informed solely by the German government. I deeply regretted the fact that Chamberlain had consulted with Daladier and informed Roosevelt of his plan to travel to Germany to meet with Hitler, while nothing had been done by the British government to inform Mussolini and the Fascist government. I also emphasized the necessity of—and the great advantages that would result from—active Italian participation in a peaceful resolution of the Sudeten question, as well as the decisive influence the Duce could exert in bringing about such a peaceful solution. But to achieve this, there was no time to lose; Chamberlain must not exclude the Duce but keep him directly and thoroughly informed of his actions and of what his plans might be. Finally, I said that the British failure to inform the Duce of Chamberlain's trip to Berchtesgaden was bound to provoke unpleasant reactions in Italy and confirm the view that England wished to exclude Italy from the entire affair.

160 In the D. Grandi Archive, b. 151, file 199, subfile 2, insert 3. Grandi would later write about this incident, with few variations and minor details, in the memoirs he drafted—without the aid of documents—in Portugal.

At the same time, he had tried to explain to Rome the lack of prior information regarding the prime minister's trip and the fact that the French and Americans had instead been informed of it, arguing that Chamberlain—already accused of treason by the opposition—had had to do so to avoid giving new fuel

to these accusations.

At first, Grandi's attempt to restart a dialogue between London and Rome seemed to yield no results. The Letter to Runciman, in which Mussolini had proposed imposing more demands on Prague than Hitler had requested up to that point, and the speech in Trieste, with its assertion that in the event of a general war Italy would stand alongside Germany, had, as one can easily imagine, had a completely negative effect on London. On the 19th, Halifax, speaking with Grandi, made no secret of this:

Alluding to the Trieste speech, Halifax made it clear to me that the British government now considered Italy to be one hundred percent on the other side and that, therefore, England deemed it pointless to regard Mussolini as a potential asset in the mediation effort.

Nevertheless, Grandi had insisted that it would be appropriate for the British government to appeal to Mussolini:

I told Halifax that it was my personal opinion that the Duce not only did not want war but would do everything in his power to avoid it. I explained the particularly delicate nature of our relations with Germany and the impossibility for the Duce to take any initiative unless Chamberlain or the British government were to directly and openly urge the Duce in this regard.

The British Foreign Secretary had, once again, made no secret of his skepticism, but a question he posed—whether the agreement among the four great powers and the balancing influence of Rome on Berlin and of London on Paris were still, in his view, the foundation of Italian policy) had given Grandi some hope and had led him, on the one hand, to continue putting pressure on Ball to convince Chamberlain to approach Mussolini and, on the other hand, to reassure Rome regarding London's attitude toward Italy. For several days, however, nothing had happened. Thus, after the Godesberg meeting, Grandi had made a new attempt, this time through the former ambassador to Rome, Graham. Here is how Grandi recounted the episode and its developments as seen from London in his "note" dated September 30:

I telephoned Graham to invite him to breakfast on Monday morning, September 26. I had a long conversation with him. He, too, agreed with me. Mussolini is the only one who holds the key to the situation—that is, to peace. It may be too late, but we must not yet give up all hope. I asked Graham to go to Halifax, drawing on his responsibility and authority as a former British ambassador to Rome, to try to persuade Halifax to act—and to act immediately—in Rome. However, there needs to be some direct contact between Chamberlain and Mussolini that places the appeal to him on the same level as the appeal to Roosevelt and Chamberlain's numerous appeals to Hitler. Otherwise, it is useless. An indirect communication made through ambassadors is no longer enough. It might make matters worse rather than help. I ask Graham to do everything possible.

Graham (Graham will inform me of this on Wednesday morning and will tell me with tears in his eyes early Wednesday afternoon) goes to the Foreign Office on Tuesday, September 27. Unable to secure an audience with Halifax, he puts in writing his thoughts on the situation and on the need for Chamberlain to appeal to the Duce immediately and directly. Graham's memo is passed on to Halifax, who, after reading it, sends it to Chamberlain. Cadogan informs Graham that both Chamberlain and Halifax had received his message.

Parliament is convened. British, French, and Czechoslovak mobilization continues. Not a single soldier has yet been called up in Italy, but Italian mobilization is expected at any moment. The disagreements

among the parties in England suddenly disappear. Faced with the imminence and inevitability of the conflict, everyone rallies around Chamberlain. There is talk of a Ministry of National Unity, a war cabinet including Labour members, Churchill, and Eden, presided over by Chamberlain. Predictions regarding the parliamentary session, scheduled for Wednesday, September 28, differ from earlier expectations. No longer will it be a stormy session, but rather a sort of appeal to the nation for war, following what are expected to be Chamberlain's statements.

My telegrams to Rome from the past few hours reflect this situation. Hitler's speech leaves the situation unchanged. Chamberlain's statements make it clear that the negotiations have definitively failed. London is practically in a state of war. It must be said that England has lived up to its historical tradition as a military power during these days. When I woke up on Wednesday morning, September 28, I had the distinct feeling that only a miracle could prevent the outbreak of war. Wednesday dawned as the tragic first day of the new European conflict. War was in the air, in people's minds, in the inevitability of events. I telephoned this to Rome. While I was on the phone to Rome saying that only a miracle could now avert the catastrophe, the miracle occurred. In the early hours of the morning, Chamberlain finally sent a telegram to the Duce. Perth delivered the telegram at 10 a.m. The rest is history. But I was unaware of all this and only learned of it in the House of Commons. When I went to the House of Commons, my heart was heavy. I was by then certain deep down that this session was the session of war. Everyone with me was certain, and I believe even Chamberlain, who, for an hour and a half, delivered a speech that was nothing less than the prelude to an appeal to the nation for war. Everyone now knows how this unforgettable session unfolded. The dramatic turn of events occurred at the very moment when Chamberlain—having finished the expository part of his speech justifying his actions and preemptively condemning Germany—was interrupted by a communication from Rome and Berlin, which completely turned the situation on its head in the way that everyone knows.

I do not believe I will ever again witness such a dramatic moment in this world. Mussolini has triumphed. It is he whom millions and millions of mothers must bless today. Everyone rose to the occasion of that unforgettable moment. Even the Labour members themselves, who could not resist joining in the enthusiastic cheers directed at the Duce. Even Churchill—hateful and spiteful—who was preparing today for what was perhaps the most important speech of his entire political career, realized that he had to go over to Chamberlain and shake his hand. Only one man was unable to do so: Eden. Throughout the session and during Chamberlain's speech, I watched him closely. He wore the smile of a satisfied man preparing for his grand political comeback and his revenge against Chamberlain. Eden was clutching a stack of papers—his speech—which was supposed to begin immediately after Chamberlain's statements. Had the response from Rome and Berlin not arrived in time, yesterday would have been the great day of Eden's triumph. It was too easy a game for him. He would have demonstrated all too easily that he had been right and that Chamberlain's policy had been a complete failure, and he would have had the right to ask the British Parliament to make him the man of tomorrow's war—the Pitt against the two Napoleons: Mussolini and Hitler. That was the inevitable course of events. Everyone sensed it. It could not be ruled out that by that very evening he would have been the Prime Minister of England. The dramatic turn of events has cast Eden, perhaps forever, back into the shadows of defeat. He sensed it and did not have the strength to put on the mask that old Churchill managed to feign. Eden left the Chamber dejectedly without looking at anyone, and no one looked at him...

On the morning of Thursday the 29th, I went to Heston to say goodbye to Chamberlain, who was leaving for Munich. When I arrived at the Heston airfield, I found that many ministers had already arrived. I tried to keep to myself. Halifax spotted me, came over, shook my hand warmly, led me over to his colleagues in Parliament, and said aloud: "Here is the wise man who was right." Everyone was

very affable and cordial. Shortly afterward, Chamberlain arrived. I stepped aside, and once again Halifax came over to lead me toward Chamberlain. Chamberlain spotted me about ten paces away, came over to me, shook my hand firmly, and said, “Thank you, thank you. In a few hours I will see your leader, and I am certain that something good will come of our meeting.” I replied, “I am certain of it,” as indeed it would. Chamberlain shook my hand again, saying, “Thank you for everything.” After that, he boarded the plane. He was happy. He knew that his mission could no longer fail.

I return to London and think that if Chamberlain hadn’t decided to do what I had modestly taken the liberty of suggesting to him over the past few days—namely, to appeal directly to the Duce—how different today would have been.

Back in London, Ball calls me to say he wishes to see me. I receive him in the presence of Dingli and Crolla. Ball throws his arms around my neck, his eyes filled with tears. He tells me: “I have been instructed by the Prime Minister to express his gratitude to you. He has asked me to tell you that you were right and that he is glad to have followed your advice to appeal directly to Mussolini. We owe world peace to Mussolini...” At 3 p.m., Halifax sent for me. His expression was very different from that of our previous meeting a week ago. Halifax was smiling and making every effort to make me forget the silence he had shown toward me all these past days. He is a gentleman of the old school, and the first words he spoke to me were these: “You were right. Your advice was sound. Praise be to Providence that we followed your advice at the very last moment.”

I simply replied to Halifax, “Thank you for remembering all of this.” Halifax replied, “I haven’t forgotten it, and I never will.”

After that, Halifax asked me for my predictions regarding the Munich Conference and was surprised to hear from me that I had no doubt whatsoever about the conference’s swift success. “There is no doubt,” I insisted.

Halifax told me that he was nevertheless perplexed because the difficulties were enormous.

I replied to Halifax that the difficulties were not immense. The greatest difficulty had already been overcome—that of bringing together the four leaders of the four great nations of Europe. The four could no longer part ways without an agreement. Since they had agreed to discuss matters together, all four were equally bound to themselves to succeed. Peace is now assured.

Halifax listened to me and said that he saw a positive outlook in my words, and he thanked me again, shaking my hand warmly 161.

As the Great Powers had foreseen, at that point, the Munich Conference (September 29–30) could not fail to achieve its objective—at least for the time being. The domestic repercussions in Germany would have been too negative: the Germans, like the French, the British, and the Italians, also wanted peace. The spontaneous expressions of sympathy that the people of Munich showed toward Daladier and Chamberlain—and which aroused such fury in Hitler[162]—demonstrate this. Hitler and, above all, Ribbentrop, it is true, would have liked to achieve a resounding victory and further increase the price to be paid by Czechoslovakia (the notable absentee in Munich, where its fate was being decided) and, consequently, by France and England. And that could have caused the conference to collapse. But both within the Nazi leadership itself and at Wilhelmstrasse, there were those who wanted to prevent this. Upon learning of von Ribbentrop’s intentions, von Weizsäcker had hastened to inform Attolico—who was about to depart from Berlin for Munich—and to provide him with the conditions that had been

formulated earlier and which Hitler and von Ribbentrop were now preparing to consider superseded by events.[163]

We have various accounts of the conference (Mussolini and Ciano traveled to Munich by train; Hitler was waiting for them in Kufstein, and they continued their journey with him). The most useful for us, however, are those by those who participated in all or part of the proceedings: Ciano, the French ambassador to Berlin François-Poncet, and Hitler's interpreter Paul Schmidt. We owe the French ambassador, among other things, a firsthand description of some of the key figures at the time of their first meeting at the Führer-Haus, the conference venue:

161 Regarding the proceedings of the session in the House of Commons (for the official record, see House of Commons, Debates, 1938, CCCXXXIX, cols. 26 ff.), Grandi reported via telegram to Rome; this was published in R. Quartararo, *Inghilterra e Italia*, op. cit., pp. 640 ff.

W3 See ibid., p. 387; M. Magistrati, *L'Italia a Berlino*, op. cit., p. 152; M. Luciolli, *Palazzo Chigi: Anni Roventi. Ricordi di vita diplomatica italiana dal 1933 al 1948*, Milan 1976, p. 61.

The members of the Conference mingle with one another in a hall where a "buffet" has been set up. They exchange courteous but cold handshakes and size each other up: Mussolini, stocky, tightly clad in his uniform, wearing a Caesar-like mask, with an air of protectiveness, very much at ease, as if at home, flanked by Ciano, a large, vigorous young man, always at his master's side, more of an aide-de-camp than a Minister of Foreign Affairs; Chamberlain, a bit graying, stooped, with thick eyebrows, protruding teeth, a pockmarked face, and hands reddened by rheumatism—a typical British old lawyer—surrounded by Wilson and Strang, dressed like him in black, reserved and unremarkable; Hitler was amiable, despite his gruff, rustic voice, but troubled, agitated, and very pale; moreover, he was unable to speak with his guests since he did not know English, French, or Italian, and his guests did not understand German—except for Mussolini, whom the Führer did not leave for a moment.

The first part of the session, from 12:45 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., was devoted to preliminary matters. Daladier was the most forthright: was the aim to subject Czechoslovakia to an amputation intended to strengthen its health, or was it a way to weaken it and lead it to ruin? Mussolini declared that Hitler's intentions had been misunderstood. The aim was to consolidate and respect Czechoslovakia's existence. The decisive moment came in the late afternoon. The discussion proceeded with difficulty. Mussolini was almost always slumped in his armchair.

His features—as François-Poncet recalls165—were extraordinarily expressive and never remained still for a moment; his mouth would open into a broad smile and then contort into a grimace; his eyebrows would rise in astonishment and furrow in menace; his eyes took on an amused and curious expression, and then, suddenly, flashed with intensity.

Standing beside him, Hitler fixes him with a piercing gaze; he is drawn to him, as if captivated, hypnotized; when the "Duce" laughs, he laughs; if the "Duce" frowns, he frowns; it is a true spectacle of mimicry that was to leave a lasting impression on me and lead me to believe—wrongly, as it turned out—that Mussolini exerted a well-established influence over the Führer. Indeed, on that day he did. At other times, it was Mussolini, in his indecisive conduct, who was influenced by his rival, who had become his accomplice.

The decisive "initiative" of the conference came from Mussolini: amid the general uncertainty and

fearing that Hitler and von Ribbentrop might ruin everything with an untimely and intransigent intervention, at a certain point he pulled from his pocket the initial German conditions that von

Weizsäcker had had sent to Attolico, and presented them “as an integral part of an original Italian plan”166—a plan that did not exist, but which Rome would attempt to present as credible in the days that followed, just as it would the claim that, even without the British move, Mussolini would have intervened with Hitler167.

Once the biggest issue had been resolved, the “Duce” seemed at times almost detached from the rest of the negotiations. Ciano, still in awe of him, describes him this way168:

The Duce, somewhat bored by the vaguely parliamentary atmosphere that always arises at conferences, paces around the room, hands in his pockets and somewhat distracted. From time to time, he helps in the search for a formula. With his great mind, always ahead of events and men, the outcome is now a foregone conclusion, and while the others are still struggling with more or less formal problems, he is almost no longer interested. He is already looking beyond this and pondering other matters.

Now certain of how things would turn out, Mussolini spoke at some length and very cordially with Chamberlain about Anglo-Italian relations and Spain (a formal meeting between the two was even floated for the following day, but Mussolini preferred not to pursue it because it might have “offended German sensibilities,”69) and, above all, he focused on the issue of Polish and Hungarian claims, which the others, at this point, would have preferred to drop or, at least, postpone to another occasion, but which he, after the positions he had taken over the past fifteen days, obviously could not help but continue to support.

The others—all the others—as Ciano170 would note—would gladly have avoided discussing it. In reality, they were trying to evade the discussion. But, as always happens, when there is a strong will, it prevails, and the others rally around it. The issue was discussed and resolved through a formula that I have no hesitation in calling very brilliant.

Around nine o’clock in the evening, the session was adjourned. Hitler invited everyone to dinner. Only the Italians accepted, however; the French and British declined, saying they had to contact their governments.

So we found ourselves seated at dinner with Hitler and Mussolini,” recalled P. Schmidt,[171] “in an exclusively Italian-German company, at a banquet table that was far too long for the occasion. It was then that Mussolini spoke of the catastrophic consequences that would have befallen Italy during the Ethiopian War had the League of Nations extended the oil sanctions, even for just eight days.

169 Ibid. While Ciano tends to suggest a certain coldness on Mussolini’s part toward Chamberlain, the latter, in a letter dated October 2 to the Archbishop of Canterbury, extolled the friendship and cordiality of his conversations with the “Duce.” See R. Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain*, op. cit., p. 376.

Once work resumed, by 1:00 a.m. on September 30 the text of the agreement was ready. Half an hour later, it was signed.

Mussolini and Ciano immediately departed for Rome. Upon entering Italy, the “Duce’s” train was met

along the route with spontaneous and growing displays of enthusiasm which—just as had happened to Hitler with the welcome Munich had given Chamberlain and Daladier—made Mussolini increasingly irritated as he gradually grasped the true meaning of such enthusiasm. Here is how Anfuso recalled this aspect of the journey:

Once we crossed the Brenner Pass... we found that while the Bavarians wept with joy, the Italians were prostrating themselves—not before the Duce, founder of the Empire, but before the angel of peace... Upon arriving in Verona, where just a few days earlier Mussolini had declared himself armed to the teeth—to frenetic cheers—we noticed that the fact that he had laid down his arms in Munich earned him, from that very same crowd, ecstatic outbursts to which, as a tribune, he could not have aspired, since such mystical homage is the privilege of miracle workers. Between Verona and Bologna, I saw peasants literally on their knees as his train passed... In Bologna, a stronghold of tumultuously bellicose fascism, Mussolini realized he had become a saint and concluded that the effects of Munich had exceeded his expectations: Italians clearly preferred olive branches to laurel branches and the dove to the eagle.

In Rome, a cheering crowd awaited the "Duce."[173] Appearing on the balcony of Palazzo Venezia, Mussolini spoke very few words: "Comrades! You have experienced memorable hours. In Munich, we worked for peace in accordance with justice. Is this not the ideal of the Italian people?"[174]; but he had to return to the balcony many times, called back by the crowd.

Rarely had popular enthusiasm surrounding him been so spontaneous and heartfelt—perhaps only on the day of the conquest of Addis Ababa. For Mussolini, it was a triumph, but not the one he would have wanted: where was the warlike and heroic spirit of the Italians? That enthusiasm had

173 G. Bottai also recorded Mussolini's return to Rome in his aforementioned diary (f. 609, dated September 30, 1938): "Mussolini's return from Munich. There is a tinge of genuine emotion in the air. Even Balbo seems happy, less preoccupied [?] with himself. The train arrives. Right behind the Duce, hot on his heels, comes a triumphant Galeazzo, with a complex smirk, as if to say: 'Here I am—I'm not going to disappear, but I was there, and I'm here too!' - At Palazzo Venezia, he suddenly turns toward Balbo, who is congratulating him, and says with discontented irritation: 'You see, then, that the Axis policy is good for something.' Always on the defensive."

a different origin and a different meaning, which the "Duce" could not have approved of. It was natural and understandable that Italians were happy and proud because war had been averted and Italy, "thanks to Mussolini," had been the arbiter to whom the democracies had ultimately been forced to turn—reluctantly—and whom Hitler had listened to. But their enthusiasm went beyond these limits; it revealed a joy at having escaped danger and an attachment to peace so excessive as to denote a lack of "dignity," "spirit of sacrifice," "narrow-minded bourgeois selfishness," "pacifism," and fear—not unlike those of the "lifeless" and "putrid" democracies. In short, the Italians were not applauding him as the "brilliant architect of Munich," but as the "savior of peace," and this demonstrated that the "new Fascist man" was far from having been forged. His "sense of the masses," after what he had seen from the train, could not be mistaken. And then there were the police reports—those from the preceding weeks and those that reached him in the weeks that followed—all in agreement (just as the reports that foreign diplomats sent to their governments[175]) in describing the state of mind of the Italians: before Munich, they were under the nightmare of war—a war they did not want and did not understand why Italy had to fight— and after Munich, filled with jubilation at having narrowly escaped danger and with hosannas to the "Duce" who had "saved the peace." And, in addition to the police reports, there were the countless letters that men and, above all, women of all walks of life (though generally of modest

means) had written to him and continued to write to him—spontaneous letters that, both in their simplicity and, at times, in their naive search for solutions to the crisis and in their trust in the "Duce," left no room for doubt and constitute for us a valuable record for understanding and assessing both what the Czechoslovak crisis and Munich meant for vast sectors of the Italian people, how they affected the "consensus," and, finally, certain aspects of the "consensus" itself, in particular its Mussolini-inspired foundation 176.

Here are some examples of the content and tone of these letters.

Before Munich.

A mother who had lost her son in the war of 'i?-i8: "Your Excellency, save Italy! Abandon that criminal. The Italian soldier does not fight for bandits. We loved you so much; do not destroy us now—Have mercy on us in the face of such misfortune; save us; abandon that accursed man who has always done evil. The war is destroying you too. Have mercy on so many mothers—you are a father too."

A group of Milanese women: "Duce! We believe that nothing is impossible for you! If you want to, you can save peace!

"Duce, save peace!

"Save thousands of human lives! Come up with a plan, take action, Duce! You can do anything you want! "Duce, save peace! God and mankind can only bless you!"

Two "most humble teachers, your colleagues," from Asti: "We take the liberty of addressing you, Your Excellency, and imploring you not as Head of the Government and Founder of the Empire, but as a generous and great Father.

"At this hour when the destinies of Europe and our beloved homeland are being decided, we implore you in the name of so many mothers, sisters, wives, and so many innocent children, to avert the grave danger of war as much as possible. Grant that our factories, our shipyards, and our good and hardworking rural populations—though ready to follow Your commands—may attend to their work in the fruitful rhythm of peace, and ensure that in that peace so dearly desired by You, our Leader, they may draw the elements of life for the greater prosperity of our beloved Italy."

And this is not to mention the expressions of praise and approval—which, for him, were quite different —that came to him from the political, economic, and intellectual worlds, even from people who, until the day before, had viewed his stance on the Czechoslovakian issue with alarm and criticized it, and, not infrequently, many other aspects of his policies as well; and who now seemed—and at times sincerely —to have forgotten everything (or perhaps to hope that the lesson would serve to make him change his policies) in the face of the "success" (or the narrow escape) of Munich. A typical example is that

A war orphan from Genoa: "Duce, prevent the war. Advise Hitler that this cause is holier than any Sudeten issue.

"I implore you in the name of my mother, who endured the unendurable until her untimely death.

- for all the mothers, wives, and sisters of too many, countless heroes of Italy and the world, for

their tears that are still fresh and searing

- in the name of the Fallen...

- by virtue of the moral and material misery I have endured in my life, which was devoid of childhood and youth.

“And with me, all the orphans.

“Duce, a nation cannot be rebuilt with the love and courage of these past twenty years only to sacrifice it to a Sudeten issue. For war is annihilation for both victors and vanquished, and centuries will pass before the world gives birth to a new Architect...”

The wife of an elderly squadrist, from Savona: “Beloved Duce. I am writing to You on behalf of so many mothers, wives, and daughters in Savona... You can do anything in the world, if You wish. You have done so many wonderful things; You have transformed Italy into an Empire, into a great Nation—but please ensure that all Your work is not now destroyed. Make sure Italy remains at peace. The entire Italian people want peace, not war. Those who cheer for war are a tiny percentage—they are young people or those who have nothing to lose. But deep down, they too want peace.

“Ask people of sound judgment and listen to their answer.

“We do not even want to imagine our homes being destroyed, the industries that provide for us being razed to the ground, everything being wiped out.

“And are the lives of millions of people worth nothing? Among them are the lives of your own children.

“For whom must we sacrifice everything? For people we don’t even know, whom we don’t love, for a cause that doesn’t concern us. Duce, know that we want peace. We ask for it as a supreme favor...”

An “old-school fascist from the very beginning,” from Naples: “Duce, you alone can save Europe from the scourge that threatens it. Peace would be assured by an act of concession on Hitler’s part, who is now stubbornly clinging to an issue that is more a matter of form than of substance, because he will undoubtedly get the Sudetenland, and England will guarantee it... Only to you could he make the noble gesture of yielding, so as to continue to deserve the praise for moderation and patience that you bestowed upon him in your speeches in Veneto—and because, I do not believe, he would be able to refuse you... If you were to ask him and if Hitler were to grant it, you would become—more than you already are in the eyes of the right-thinking—the Idol of the World!”

A woman from Milan: “Duce! At this most grave moment for Italy and for all of Europe, only you in the world—perhaps even more than God—can save humanity from the terrifying catastrophe of war. It is impossible that a divine, supernatural mind like yours could fail to find a peaceful solution to this conflict.

“Duce! Attempt the impossible, and you will be blessed by millions of mothers and wives.”

An Italian woman from Lausanne: “Your Excellency. For pity’s sake. You, who deeply love your people and who, as a human being, can do anything, do the impossible to prevent Italy from being

plunged into fire and bloodshed. Let us remain calm and behave well. God will bless [nc] the Duce, his aides, and the Fatherland—our Fatherland, Your Excellency—which is so beautiful and great."

A notary, from Moffetta: "Duce of Fascism, in these days of feverish trepidation, on the dreadful eve of the cataclysm that will (thanks to the war) upend not only the very existence of nations and states, but also the very structure of humanity, in all manifestations of its current erroneous orders, allow me, Your Excellency, to... to express, from my humble station, a word, to utter a plea, to affirm a desire. This word is brief, and is summed up in two syllables: Peace!

"This was the word loved and preached by Christ! The word of the Angel, the word that represents, for humanity, its sole and greatest aspiration, its greatest happiness!—peace

"Should this not be the word cherished and favored by a nation and its leader, who has established Christianity as the foundation of religion, morality, and law for the nation itself?...

"Your Excellency. As a man, as a citizen, as a Christian, and as the fortunate leader of a people of 50 million subjects, would you not also long for these dreadful calamities to be averted? And for the word 'Peace' to finally triumph, for the good and salvation of all?...'

And finally, a Fascist engineer from Rome: "To His Excellency Benito Mussolini, Duce of Italy, 'An idea:

- Fly immediately to Hitler. Convince him to accept that the Sudetenland and the disputed territories be occupied as soon as possible by Italian military forces and remain there until the plebiscites are completed.

- Continue by plane to London after summoning Benes and, of course, Chamberlain there. Convince these gentlemen to accept the aforementioned solution.

"Hitler may agree, given that he considers you a good friend—not least because of the support you've shown him in recent days and the formal promise you've made to stand by his side in the event of war...

" If this plan succeeds, you will have saved Europe—and perhaps the world—from a great massacre, and above all, you will have rendered outstanding service."

After Munich.

A chief physician at the Civil Hospitals of Genoa: "Duce! You could not have demonstrated more humanely the genius that God has bestowed upon you—God who, as the Pope once said, visibly protects you. Thank you!"

A chemical plant worker from Milan: "To you, our most illustrious Duce, who have saved all of humanity and especially our dear and beautiful Italy—together with my family—I send my regards. May you live long, and may God grant you good health, together with all your loved ones; and best wishes also to our good sovereigns and emperors. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything you do. Duce, Duce, Duce."

The sister of a soldier who fell in World War I, from Venice: “Duce, there is a Supreme Being above, but after Him, it is You on earth. I had always thought so, and now, with this supreme trial, you have given me certainty... Please allow me, through this letter, to send you my thanks and those of my family for the salvation of our beautiful and victorious Italy.

“May God bless you.”

A teacher, from Giarre: “Duce, you are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. I, who follow and adore you because you have made our homeland the shining beacon to which humanity—having lost its way toward the future—entrusts itself, would like to look into your eyes, in which our people recognize and exalt themselves, and to kiss your mighty hand that commands and entrusts with the gesture of Caesar and Jesus.”

A school janitor, from Turin: “Duce, please accept my heartfelt thanks for the peace that has been secured. My nephew is already fighting for the Empire; he had just been called up again. Only someone with a father’s heart like yours can imagine my anxiety. And now that, thanks to You, O Duce, peace has been concluded, my sincere and heartfelt thanks go to You, also on behalf of all the mothers who, like me, lived in anxiety and distress. God, who sees all, will repay You for all the good You do for Italy and for humanity. My faith is in You.”

“A widow from the Great War”: “May God bless you, Duce! You are the light that illuminates the world!”

A man from Verona: “O Duce, may the Good Lord follow your every step and grant you health, strength, and a long life.

“Please allow me, as a sign of my deepest devotion, to kiss your hands.”

A twenty-five-year-old woman from Rome: “Duce, may God bless you! This is the prayer that springs from my heart every morning, for you as well as for my loved ones. And it is renewed with even greater fervor on the eve of some great event… and God hears me and blesses you and your works, for the good of our Italy.”

And finally, a Tuscan landowner from Sinalunga: “Duce, allow me to express to you my gratitude as a father, my admiration as a man, and my exaltation as a Fascist for the admirable way in which you have resolved—with no apparent effort and with perfect timing—a situation that had come to seem terrifying to the whole world.

“You, Duce, by saving the peace, have raised your name and that of our Italy a thousand cubits higher...

“Duce, in Munich you have immeasurably expanded the nation’s ideal and economic borders; may God preserve you for a long time for its sake!”

from the Prince of Piedmont, who on September 30 hastened to send the following note177 to Medici del Vascello, Undersecretary to the Presidency:

Dear Medici! I would be very grateful if you would convey—on my behalf—to the Duce just how much he has contributed to the events of these past few days.

I would have liked to telegraph or write to him directly—but I thought that my sentiments would reach him sooner and more effectively through you.

Please tell him of my great joy at this new and tremendous personal success!

Tell him how my Italian spirit still trembled with gratitude—with pride—with deep, complete admiration...

At this point, before moving on to the "post-Munich" period—to what it meant for Italian domestic and foreign policy, and also to what it might have meant—we must pause for a moment to consider an issue that we have so far only touched upon. All those who experienced the Czechoslovak crisis alongside Mussolini—and indeed almost all foreign observers in Italy, not least the Pope[178]—were convinced that in September 1938 Mussolini wanted anything but a conflict and, above all, did not want Italy to be forced to participate in one. Some of his remarks, such as the one reported by Ciano at the end of his notes on the events of September 28, should not be misleading. Mussolini was aware of Italy's military unpreparedness; he realized that the conflict would be protracted (which would exacerbate Italy's military inferiority) and, most likely, that, whatever the outcome might be (and at that time his regard for German military preparedness and capabilities was not yet particularly high), it would impoverish all the belligerents and play into the hands of international communism.[179] Furthermore, he was so aware that the Axis was "still" unpopular that he reportedly said it would take twelve years for Italians to accept it,[180] and that the autarkic policy—the prerequisite for "effective" economic self-sufficiency and thus for genuine rearmament—was itself still so far from being realized as to rule out the possibility of meeting the demands of a modern war, one that was, moreover, almost certainly going to be a long one. If this was true—and we, too, are convinced of it—the obvious question is: why did Mussolini commit himself to such an extent that, had a general war broken out, he could not have failed to participate in it, and—had it not been for the unexpected turn of events brought about by Chamberlain's appeal—he would have participated? Simply responding with what we have already said regarding the Trieste speech is not sufficient. It is impossible to respond by resorting to arguments such as the weakening of his political capabilities, sheer recklessness, a sense of duty toward Hitler, the moral and political impossibility—after what he had said—of contradicting himself, or, worse still, the influence of Ciano's optimism and recklessness. Less than a year later, in a situation that was more difficult for him—with the Axis having solidified into a full-fledged alliance—these same arguments would not have been strong enough to push him to participate in the conflict triggered by the Danzig issue or to prevent him from adopting a much more cautious stance from the very beginning. And as for Ciano, while it is true that, as a supporter of the alliance with Germany, he had in the meantime become its critic and opponent, it is also true that he was certainly not the one who could have persuaded Mussolini not to do what he "felt" he had to do. The answer to the question we have posed must therefore be sought elsewhere. And, in our view, it can be found only by turning to Mussolini's "ideology" and its power to influence him—a power so potent during this period that it overrode his political judgment and his ability to "stay within his limits." That is, we are referring to his conviction that France and England would not go to war because they were demographically "old" and therefore lacked the moral dynamism necessary to take risks and make sacrifices, and because their "lifeless" and "selfish" democratic regimes (and especially the British one, which lacked even those subversive and ideological forces that were at work in the French regime and influenced its government) also shared this same lack of dynamism. From this conviction stemmed the certainty that, by supporting Hitler—and indeed, in some respects even going further than he did—he would be able to achieve, without any risk whatsoever, a whole series of positive outcomes: dealing a blow to and humiliating France and England, undermining their relations—and in particular France's relations with the USSR—providing

clear proof of the Axis's vitality, and gaining sympathy and support in Poland and Hungary that would be useful in countering Germany's growing political and economic presence in those two countries. And this conviction is echoed in the closing remarks of his October 25, 1938, speech to the National Council of the PNF, where, concluding his plea in support of the tasks the party had to carry out to indoctrinate Italians in the fascist ideology, he said:[181]

I was mathematically certain that the French and the British would not take action against us. Where does this certainty come from? From the tables categorizing the British and French populations by age. It emerged from those tables of French origin that in France there are twelve million men who are over fifty-five years of age. There may be exceptions, but the vast majority, having reached the milestone of fifty-five, is a weary, disillusioned mass that has endured the inevitable illnesses that accompany mortal life, and that desires only to drink brandy, smoke fine tobacco, and live in peace.

Their dynamism is gone. It can no longer exist; it is gone, because dynamism belongs to the young. It is the young who take risks; the others, if they have taken risks, close that chapter; if they have not taken risks, they no longer wish to do so. That is why we are confident in our future; that is why we are directing all the energies of the Italian people toward the goal of power. Because the Europe of tomorrow will be a constellation of three or four democratic blocs, around which smaller satellites will orbit. We will be one of those major blocs.

Viewed from this "ideological" perspective, not only does Mussolini's conduct in the Czechoslovak affair acquire a logic it would otherwise lack, but it also reveals how much the lesson of September '38 influenced his behavior the following August, when—having abandoned (regardless of what he had told the National Council of the PNF to justify his conduct, extol his foresight and resolve, and offer "irrefutable proof" of the need to implement his political directives), the "Duce" faced the crisis that led to the outbreak of World War II with an entirely different spirit and political realism.

And so we come to the "post-Munich" period. In domestic politics, one might be tempted to say that Munich had no consequences or, if it did, the only one seems to have been to provoke—albeit within the very specific limits we have mentioned—the final spike in the "approval" rating, if not for his policies, then for Mussolini's personal prestige. All the various initiatives that we have seen characterize the regime during Italy's last two years of peace had, in fact, been launched or were under consideration before Munich. To limit ourselves to this observation, however, would be wrong both in general and, above all, with regard to

Mussolini. Contrary to appearances, Munich did in fact have extremely important consequences for the reality of the regime. It did not give rise to new initiatives, but it prompted Mussolini—and, following his lead, the various bodies responsible for the regime's mass politics, the PNF, and the Ministries of Popular Culture and National Education—to accelerate the implementation of those initiatives and infuse them with a radically new energy.

After the disappointment he felt at the Italian people's attitude toward the prospect of a European conflict and the country's reaction to the Munich Agreement, it was in fact even more necessary than before for Mussolini to rush the process of the regime's totalitarianization and push it as far as possible without compromise, so as to put an end to all those who did not share his policies and sought to curb them, and so as to finally bring the "new man" to life through the younger generations. The diaries of Ciano, Bottai, and De Bono, his public statements, everything we know about his psychological state, his intentions, and his actions as head of government and leader of Fascism leave no doubt on this point. His irritation with the monarchy and his intentions to do away with it, as well as his hostility

toward the Church (in the Grand Council on October 18, he referred to the Vatican as the “Catholic ghetto” and to Pius XI as the “pontiff who will leave behind the greatest pile of rubble”182; a month later, he gave the Milan federal representative, R. Parenti, accusing him of having been naive enough to believe that Cardinal Schuster had become a fascist and of having thus created dangerous confusion between the Church and fascism183), and above all against the bourgeoisie, reached their peak after Munich. And it was after Munich that his pro-rural stances and support for the demographic campaign184 became harsher and more frequent once again. Not to mention his “semi-secret” speech on October 25, 1938, to the National Council of the PNF, the one featuring the three “powerful punches to the gut of the bourgeoisie” and his explanation of the reason for his confidence in the face of the Czechoslovak crisis, in which the reference to how Italians had experienced Munich is explicit and his condemnation of the bourgeoisie’s behavior—even on that occasion—is clear185: *

As early as September 17, 1938, Mussolini had issued the following telegraphic order to all prefects: “It is necessary to stem the exodus of rural dwellers as quickly and radically as possible. Pending a law that I am drafting, I order that farmers who abandon their farms not be registered with the employment offices” (ACS, Ministry of the Interior, Cipher Office, Teli, Outgoing, undated).

We have emerged from a serious crisis: that of Munich. But, take note, comrades, that there are two things regarding Munich on which the emphasis is placed. The bourgeoisie emphasize the word “peace”; conversely, fascists worthy of the name emphasize another fact: it is the first time since 1861 that Italy has played a dominant and decisive role. What happened in Munich is colossal... Now the Axis is a thorn in the side of these bourgeois, who always have their eyes on France and think that England is the ideal for every state and even for every educated individual... But above all because the Axis signifies the end of all those ideologies, of all those tendencies in which, to a residual extent, the bourgeoisie still believes... These ridiculous remnants claim to represent the Italian people; these puppets from a demolished theater would have us take them seriously. We have not done so, and we will not do so.

The driving force behind this action was, above all—as had already been the case after Hitler’s visit—the party led by Starace, which devoted itself to it, as was its custom, with uncompromising and fanatical zeal. On November 3, 1939, in the report drafted for the handover to Muti, who had been appointed his successor at the helm of the PNF,186 Starace, reviewing the party’s various areas of activity and the central themes of political education at the heart of his work as secretary-general, placed particular emphasis on the development “to the very limit” that he had given to the party’s extensive grassroots structure, so as to advance the party’s “work of cohesion and education” not only “in all sectors and among all categories,” but “down to the smallest unit to which it could turn: that is, down to the individual.”

The creation of the man—Mussolini’s “new Italian”—capable of believing, obeying, and fighting, was in fact the constant goal toward which the party directed all its efforts.

These words certainly contained a great deal of overestimation of the results achieved; what we wish to emphasize here, however, is that the greatest effort in this direction was made after Munich and, in particular, after the meeting of the Grand Council on October 18, 1938, during which Starace delivered a report that, as far as we know, was largely linked precisely to the “moral” within the party during the preceding months and focused specifically on the attitudes that had emerged regarding the Axis, racial policy, the crisis in relations with the Church, the Czechoslovak crisis, and the Munich Agreement.

The results of this campaign seem to us today to be quite modest and—as we have already said—often

counterproductive, precisely because of Mussolini and Starace's insistence on taking it down to the "lowest level," down to the individual—that is, their desire to penetrate even into people's homes and indeed into their very souls, including those who—while not being, nor even thinking they could be, opposed to the regime as a whole—wanted, however, to safeguard at least their private lives as "good" and "loyal" citizens and "Fascists" from the intrusions of the state and its policies. Hence a growing weariness, impatience, and irritation with the constant initiatives of the party and its affiliated organizations; an increasingly widespread desire to evade and defend oneself against them—which, as it became more and more widespread, ended up casting even greater discredit on the party and the regime; a distancing and passive resistance even to other initiatives that, on the contrary, lacked neither logic nor utility; an expression of criticism and defense of one's private sphere through the use of sarcastic jokes and mockery (the famous jokes), which in itself was certainly not dangerous to the regime, but which contributed to creating an atmosphere of discontent and denunciation that eventually spread even to a portion of the fascists and worried those party leaders—and they were the majority—who did not share these "excesses," considering them politically dangerous and the result of mere imitative infatuation with National Socialism. Not to mention those who saw an even graver danger in Starace's actions: a maneuver by Starace himself to revive the PNF to the detriment of the state and in a populist vein, or a maneuver by the "Ciano group" to complete the centralization of all power in their own hands. Hence, even at this level, the spread—even before it became widespread throughout the country—of growing discontent, partly sincere and partly driven by the fear of being sidelined and ousted from power sooner or later in favor of other men and power groups directly linked to Starace, Ciano, and the Germans. And this is true even though, in reality, the political alliance between Ciano and Starace (and Alfieri and Sebastiani)—which arose primarily, as we have seen, out of a shared interest in a more aggressive intervention in Spain and was subsequently strengthened partly by their shared pro-German stance and partly byStarace's interest in consolidating his position as secretary-general of the PNF—which was under threat from many dangerous contenders (from Bottai to Farinacci)—and in preventing Ciano from even considering replacing him with one of his own men '87—was just then beginning to show cracks. In fact, Ciano, too, was among those who viewed negatively the new internal crackdown launched after Hitler's visit and further intensified after Munich. However, lacking the courage to confront

187 It is telling that, in early 1937, a rumor had circulated about an impending replacement at the top of the PNF, with R. Riccardi—backed, in fact, by Ciano—set to replace Starace. See *Informazioni Cremonesi*, dated January 17, 1937.

directly address the issue with Mussolini—whose intransigence on the matter he knew all too well—he tried to influence Starace and convince him to moderate the party's actions and, above all, the anti-bourgeois campaign,1M but met with a flat refusal. Much can indeed be said—and has been said ad nauseam for years, both during and after Fascism—against Starace, but not that he was an opportunist or that he was afraid to stand up to the powerful if he believed it was right. Of modest intelligence and even more modest education, he was nonetheless an honest, consistent, and sincere man. He was almost morbidly loyal to Mussolini, so much so that when he was removed even from his post as commander of the Militia and no longer had any chance of direct contact with him, he suffered greatly; his greatest joy was simply being able to see him, mingling with the crowd, when he appeared on the balcony of Palazzo Venezia or spoke at some public ceremony; yet one cannot say that his efforts to carry out and interpret the "Duce's" directives lacked conviction. And if he often went too far in implementing those directives, it was frequently because he sought to be even more consistent than Mussolini himself, going so far as to fearlessly challenge him on certain decisions, hesitations, or tactical maneuvers.[189]

Recognizing that these results were modest and often counterproductive must not, however, lead us to underestimate the importance and potential significance of the political choice that lay at their root, nor, even less so, to overestimate their negative impact on the regime. What we said in the second chapter regarding "consensus" during these years should, we believe, clarify both what we mean and the diversity of perspectives held by Mussolini when he made this political choice and by those within the same Fascist leadership who criticized it or even disagreed with it. This diversity of perspectives clearly illustrates how far, by the end of 1938, the regime's evolution had progressed from the premises upon which it had been founded and had taken shape for about a decade. A diversity that—despite everything—was more clearly revealed by domestic policy at that time than by foreign policy, given that, while the lesson of Munich exacerbated the former in an ideological sense, it simultaneously forced Mussolini to return to a conception and a management style that were far less

189 The least problematic of Starace's somewhat broad profiles is that by S. Setta, "Achille Starace," in *Uomini e volti del fascismo* (op. cit.), pp. 443 ff.; however, the brief column by C. Laurenzi, "Starace, a 'Sui Generis' Fascist," is far more historically sound. "Il giornale nuovo," September 20, 1978, which clearly highlights his personality and political actions—both in their most criticizable and negative aspects and in their positive ones, particularly his steadfastness in waging "a courageous yet futile battle against a certain perennial Italian malpractice."

ideological aspect of the latter. Nor, to conclude on the subject of domestic politics, should one overestimate the failure of efforts to overcome the country's hostility toward the Axis and any notion of war—hostility that Munich had so spectacularly revealed and had made even more widespread. In mid-May, in his aforementioned report to the leadership of the Socialist Party examining the Italian situation,[190] E. Curiel had dwelled at length on the question of what outcome this hostility might have. And, with great realism, he had urged "caution" in drawing optimistic conclusions. At least in the short term; in the longer term, his assessment—taking into account the "maturation" of Catholic forces, the commercial and industrial middle and lower middle classes deeply affected by economic difficulties, and the youth—had been more positive. "The overwhelming majority of the Italian population," he had written, "whether for historical reasons or simply out of reluctance toward an aggressive alliance," was opposed to the Axis and to war. There might have been some who viewed "with a certain satisfaction" the prospect of "blackmailing a certain state (Yugoslavia, for example) that would yield multiple 'advantages' without any loss and resolve the problem of raw materials"; yet no one wanted a general war:

we can in fact state with the utmost certainty that not even the old-guard fascist, nor even the career officer—patriotic and chauvinistic as he may be—desires a general clash among the European powers: not even they follow fascism to these final and inevitable consequences.

Nevertheless, "the profound and pernicious influence that fascism has exerted on everyone—an influence from which even the most outspoken and more or less militant anti-fascists cannot entirely escape"—rendered this state of mind, this opposition, entirely ineffective politically:

Today, in fact—Curiel continued—it is not possible to consider this state of public opinion capable of exerting effective pressure on the dictatorship, first of all because the dictatorship is able to easily suppress any attempt at opposition, but above all because the Italian nation—and at its head, the majority of the proletariat—does not know exactly what it wants. The appeal of democracies has been significantly diminished under the weight of fascist propaganda and the unconvincing demonstrations of recent years. (One must not believe, however, that everyone accepts the fascist viewpoint wholesale: it is accepted by young fascists and anti-fascists, as well as by older anti-fascists whose hopes have

been dashed).

And the consequence of this hatred is nothing more than a sense of general discouragement, a desperate skepticism about the immediate future.

It makes possible a few brief signs of opposition, but the significance of these isolated and sporadic gestures—unsupported by a skeptical and weary public—should not be overestimated: they can only be expressions of a state of mind, one that is also evident in the numerous suicides among those called up for military service and in the relaxation of military discipline, but which I do not believe can go beyond these limits. It is limited to "hearsay" about the monarchy and the general staff; it clings to the hope of a bold move by Mussolini; it provokes waves of unjustifiable optimism (in the last week, a good portion of the population was convinced that the war would not take place).

True in mid-May, this assessment was even more accurate five months later, when Mussolini's "decisive intervention" had rekindled many hopes, caused France and England to lose even more credibility, and allayed fears. And this occurred against an international backdrop that would continue to deteriorate (partly as a result of Munich) to the point of culminating—this time for certain—in war with such rapidity that the predictions of those, like Curiel, who had counted on the gradual strengthening of forces potentially hostile to the regime would prove, at best, to be based on a timeline that was far too long.

Let us now turn to the consequences that the Munich Agreement had for Mussolini's foreign policy. By this point, the emphasis should be placed not so much on Ciano's role as on Mussolini's, given that by the summer of '38 the "Duce" had practically taken back control of foreign policy, leaving his son-in-law with little more than day-to-day management, while at the same time increasingly ceding to him control of domestic policy, of which his son-in-law effectively became the true deus ex machina.

A few years ago, Pastorelli wrote[191] that the Munich Conference represented the culmination of Mussolini's new policy. This time, Germany kept Italy regularly informed of its moves, going so far as to propose a secret meeting between the two leaders at the Brenner Pass. Great Britain—though the initiative was also French—turned to Italy for mediation. Even in Munich, Mussolini played a decisive role: he imposed the framework for the agreement—which, though of German origin, was already twenty-four hours out of date—and he insisted on Hungary's demands. Hitler had to accept both, effectively granting Mussolini the role of "first." At this point, everything proceeds smoothly: the close friendship with Germany strengthens Mussolini without binding him, and is also accompanied by the desired position of primacy over Hitler; a truly privileged situation that allows him to maintain—and perhaps improve upon—the results achieved with the British, and to proceed with the settlement of pending issues with the French.

To understand Fascist foreign policy following the Munich Agreement, this theoretical—or, if you prefer, potential—framework must always be kept in mind. In fact, it is not only theoretically perfect but also essentially corresponds to how Mussolini himself must have viewed the situation and the possible developments of his policy along a much more dynamic trajectory than in the previous two years—a trajectory made possible both by the prestige and recognition that Italy had (or he believed it had) earned through Munich and by the objectively greater opportunity that Rome now had in the new international situation (in which, moreover, the Spanish question carried much less weight than before—partly because the Nationalists' victory was by then practically a foregone conclusion and, following the position Franco had taken at the height of the Czechoslovak crisis, was causing London and, to some extent, Paris less and less concern; and partly because the focus of international attention had by

then shifted to Central Europe) had the opportunity to swing between London and Berlin.

It is not easy to say with certainty exactly how Mussolini intended to proceed in this new situation. However, much of the available evidence suggests that—while obviously maintaining the Rome-Berlin Axis, which alone could provide him with the political clout and deterrent necessary to carry out his plan—he intended to complement it with a sort of Rome-London Axis, which would naturally not exclude the former or even the London-Paris Axis, but which was meant to be, so to speak, the backbone of the entire system, in that it was intended to ensure its underlying balance, serve as a brake and a buffer against the excesses of the other two partners, and act as the fulcrum of a de facto directorate of the four great powers—which would no longer be the old "Four-Power Pact" —both because it was not formalized and, above all, because within it there would in practice be two "major" powers, due to their moderating and hegemonic roles—England and Italy—and two "minor" powers, Germany and France—but would in practice have a similar function and, like the former, would be detached from the League of Nations, which, in turn, would have to be "reformed" and, if necessary, dissolved. Finally, Mussolini did not rule out the possibility that other minor and complementary axes might gradually join this tri-axis system, such as the Rome-Prague-Warsaw and Rome-Belgrade-Budapest axes,192 which he—and even more so Ciano—conceived as a means of containing German dynamism to the east and southeast. In this latter regard, certain references in Ciano's diary[191] are highly significant, as are—even more so—the actions taken in Munich and immediately afterward in support of Polish and, above all, Hungarian claims against Czechoslovakia—claims that, not coincidentally, were opposed by the Germans until the very end and ultimately accepted by them only to avoid jeopardizing the possibility of reaching the much-desired formal alliance with Rome[194].

192 In the months immediately following Munich, the Italians also carried out intense activity directed toward Romania with a fourfold aim: to promote the formation of a Danubian Triple Alliance (Poland, Hungary, Romania), to bring Romania closer to the Axis, to counter Germany's unscrupulous economic penetration into that country, and to find an outlet for the Italian economy there. Much hope was placed in an economic mission—led by R. Riccardi and carried out in November, which subsequently also traveled to Yugoslavia—to achieve these last two objectives; ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence (1922–1943), W/R, file "Riccardi R.," subfile 1.

Immediately after Munich, traces of this complex plan can even be found in the most serious Fascist press closest to Mussolini, particularly in two articles in *Civiltà fascista*, "British Reasons for the September Crisis" and "At Munich and After Munich,"[195] in which—not coincidentally—the need to de-ideologize international issues was emphasized (with Munich serving as a first step in that direction), and it was stated in no uncertain terms that while England had demonstrated, during the most serious crisis of the past twenty years, its ability to bring an influence of moderation and peace to the London-Paris axis, Italy, for its part, had been able to play a role within the Rome-Berlin axis parallel to that of England. Thus, one might even think that the new Europe tends to be organized not so much around a four-power pact as around a free collaboration among the continental powers, regulated by two safety valves: that of the British Empire and that of the Italian Empire. The former is insular but has now been rendered continental by the Strait; the latter is continental but has been rendered almost insular by the barrier of the Alps. This led to suggestions that the "abrupt plunge into reality" at Munich—which had caused France to resume "immediate contact with its national interests"— might also lead it to "seek its security in the strengthening of its own power, in the formation of alliances based on a community of national interests, not on ideological solidarity." This last point was particularly interesting, given that Mussolini's plan did not at all rule out—and, indeed, at this stage envisaged—a direct agreement with Paris.

A master of balance in domestic politics and naturally inclined never to close any doors behind him, Mussolini's idea must have been, in short, not to tie himself too closely to Germany ("We must," Ciano noted on October 27,[196], "keep both doors open. The alliance today would close one of them, perhaps forever, and not the least important one") and to try to create a European system based on

194 See ibid., pp. 193, 195, 193 ff., 196 ff. (from which it appears that Ciano was even more convinced than Mussolini of the advisability of fully supporting Hungarian demands and of "encircling" Germany), 199, 200, 204, 204 ff.; as well as *Europe Toward Catastrophe*, op. cit., pp. 366 ff.

a balance of mutually influencing bilateral relations, with London and Rome serving as both the hinge and the pivot. An idea difficult to put into practice, but perhaps not unachievable, had it not had the flaw of also envisaging a series of concrete advantages for Italy that, in fact, rendered it unachievable. It matters little whether this was due to objective reality or the "short-sightedness" of others. And this was not so much because of the advantages that he—driven in part by Ciano—thought he could secure in Albania, which, all things considered, London and Paris might perhaps have eventually agreed to let him occupy, especially since an Albania firmly in Italian hands could represent a concrete obstacle to German penetration along the Danube, but because of the costs that France would have had to bear. However limited they might be for the time being, these advantages in fact entailed three consequences that made them unacceptable to London even before they were to Paris, and such as to undermine the entire Mussolini plan at its very foundation. First consequence: since securing them would require London's "good offices" in Paris—or, at the very least, a British refusal to support the French in the dispute—they would have undermined the Anglo-French relations upon which London's entire policy was based. Second consequence: they would have altered the balance of power between Italy and England in the Mediterranean to Italy's advantage, at a time, moreover, when—given the situation in the Far East—this route was even more vital for England than in normal times. Third consequence: the Italian demands, merely by being put forward—not to mention the fact that once the issue was on the table, it became obvious that these were only the first, to be followed by others even more onerous—demonstrated that Mussolini's "spirit of conciliation and peace" was entirely instrumental and that his true aim was to be able to continue using—without definitively binding himself to Hitler — of the threat posed by his privileged relations with Berlin to pursue his own policy and strengthen his position at the expense of France and, indirectly, of England; and that, therefore, by pursuing an agreement with him, one would not even truly secure Italy's friendship in the event of a conflict with Germany, since Mussolini would continue to vacillate indefinitely, pursuing only his own selfish advantage and strengthening his position.

The most recent studies on Anglo-Italian relations after Munich—and in particular those by Quartararo[197]—leave no doubt on this point. After the initial fleeting euphoria—that "nightmarish" euphoria that swept over so many in both England and France for a moment and that so aptly captured

R. Quartararo, *Rome Between London and Berlin*, op. cit., pp. 404 ff.

captured François Mauriac so well when, in October, he wrote: "War still reigns, more than ever, in hearts and minds. Starting tomorrow, we will resume our efforts. Today, we have the right to breathe, to bless God, to listen to our young men make plans, to watch them not yet torn apart, their hands still free of blood"198—British policy essentially abandoned the pursuit of true appeasement with both Rome and Berlin and turned ever more decisively toward rearmament and a close alliance with France (and the strengthening of ties with the U.S.) and, following the resounding and unequivocal confirmation of the soundness of the political judgment on which it was based—confirmation that came from Hitler's

definitive annexation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939—of the attempt to encircle Germany (Anglo-French negotiations with the USSR) and Italy (agreements with Greece and Turkey). By the end of 1938, the British decision had already been made. Chamberlain's speech to the House of Commons on December 15, the message he addressed to his party's journal *Home and Empire* on the occasion of the New Year, and his statements—also to the House of Commons—on January 6, 1939, are clear. Even more telling is the analysis of the prospects for Fascist foreign policy that Perth sent to Halifax on December 27, 1938, which shows how well aware the British were of what Mussolini wanted and how they judged him: without hysteria, but with a disillusioned realism matched only by the now-established conviction that, while it could not be absolutely ruled out that—in the end, if he were convinced that the Anglo-French would emerge victorious thanks to Italy's decisive contribution—the "Duce" might find it in his interest to side with them, it was nevertheless certain that, for the time being, he had no intention of breaking away from Berlin and aimed only to gain advantages at France's expense, so that Franco-Italian relations risked becoming "in all likelihood a factor of the utmost importance for European peace" ”9. It is therefore easy to understand why, by the end of the year, London even rejected certain Italian overtures—interesting in various respects—made through the "secret channel" of the embassy in London —the Dingli-Ball channel—aimed at putting forward, in view of the now imminent visit of Chamberlain and Halifax to Rome, a series of proposals that, if accepted, could not only have improved Italian-British relations but also contributed "to freeing Italy from the yoke of the Axis": British economic assistance to Hungary in collaboration with Italy; a toning down of the anti-Italian campaign underway in Malta; acceptance of the Italian position rejecting the validity of the Franco-Italian agreement of January 1935 regarding Tunisia; an increase in Italian-British trade; and, finally, possible British cooperation in the development of Ethiopia 200.

M. F. Mauriac, *Political Chronicles 1933–1954*, Verona 1968, p. 93.

M DBFP, vol. Ili, HI, pp. 496 ff.

To say this—and this must be made perfectly clear—does not, however, mean that, having by then decided to no longer place any real trust in the policy of appeasement, but being very keen to postpone as long as possible any showdown with Germany (and, probably, with Italy), so as to be able to face it under the best possible conditions of preparation, and having by then also reached the conviction that no reliable calculations could be made regarding Mussolini until the very last moment—the British gave up trying to prevent a further deterioration of relations with Rome—so much so that, as seen in the previous chapter, by mid-November the "Easter Agreements" came into effect —and gave up on promoting an improvement in Franco-Italian relations, so as not to lose contact with Italy, to curb as much as possible Germany's efforts to bind Italy completely to itself, and to prevent the conflict between Rome and Paris from further exacerbating international tensions and precipitating a premature crisis. In our view, the seemingly not always transparent Anglo-French relations in the post-Munich period should be viewed in this light. This applies both to the attitude toward Germany and—and this is what interests us here—to the attitude toward Italy.[201] As far as Italy was concerned, the problem for London was not to alarm the French by giving them the impression that Britain's commitment to acting in close coordination with them was waning; but, at the same time, to act in such a way as not to give Paris the impression that it was willing to march alongside France at all times and under all circumstances. In the latter case, in fact, the risk was that the French would become overconfident and, consequently, too intransigent toward Rome, thereby risking the permanent and premature abandonment of Mussolini into Hitler's arms or, worse, causing the entire situation to spiral out of control. In the first case, on the other hand, the risk—though admittedly smaller—was to drive the

French into despair, to strain relations with them, and to encourage, against his own intentions and interests, those groups in Paris that desired an agreement with Italy and which, driven to desperation, might even have resigned themselves to the idea of reaching such an agreement on terms too onerous for the balance of power in the Mediterranean. Paradoxically, in fact, but on closer inspection—though not too much, given France's far greater and more direct exposure to the threat of conflict—while in England, within a matter of weeks, almost everyone had a clear idea of the stance to take toward Italy, it was the French ruling class and the French government itself—in parallel with the definitive crumbling and eventual collapse of the Popular Front—that were divided and uncertain on this matter. The nationalist right (De Kerillis's position being typical) and—with some pacifist wavering—the left were clearly hostile to an agreement with Rome; some sectors of the center were uncertain and tempted by the prospect of an agreement, hoping that they might eventually succeed in putting the Axis in a difficult position and breaking Italy away from it. Truly significant was the government's reaction to the remark Mussolini had made to Daladier at the conclusion of the Munich Conference: "I hope that now you will no longer forget my address." If, as L. Noèl 202 argues, this was an invitation to send an ambassador to Rome, never had an invitation been accepted so quickly: as early as October 3, Bonnet had in fact informed the Italian chargé d'affaires in Paris that France would accredit its own ambassador to Rome, with all that this entailed—namely, recognition of the empire.

In this context, let us now examine Mussolini's moves.

On October 2, having just returned from Munich, the "Duce" reviewed the situation with Ciano and decided to put pressure on the British and finally secure the entry into force of the "Easter Agreements," going so far as to threaten, if necessary, to abandon them if this were not achieved.

"With the Duce," Ciano noted in entry 203, "we reviewed the issue of our relations with London. Given what was said to Chamberlain in Munich, we should not delay in negotiating with Perth. Tomorrow I will call him and officially notify him of the withdrawal of the 10,000 volunteers. After that, I will ask him point-blank: Do you now wish to bring the Pact of April 16 into effect?

If they do, fine. Otherwise, everyone will play their own game: the Duce also says to point out that the Grand Council could denounce this agreement, which has been waiting too long to be finalized.

Following this line of thought and capitalizing on the now imminent session of the Grand Council, Ciano used almost ultimatum-like language with the British ambassador the following day: 204:

202 L. Noël, *Les illusions de Stresa*, op. cit., p. 127. This interpretation is indirectly confirmed by a dispatch dated October 2, 1938, from Blondel to Bonnet; see DDF, Series II, XI, pp. 760 ff.

I had a meeting with Perth. I expressed myself as agreed with the Duce. The arguments were so compelling that he himself could not raise any serious objections, and he tried to bring up the issue [of the withdrawal from Spain] of the aircraft. I advised against raising new difficulties and recommended adhering to the terms of our previous agreements. I confirm that it is pointless to discuss four-party conferences or other visits until relations have been normalized: these may follow, but not precede, the entry into force of the Pact. Finally, I add that a response—even if only in principle—should be given before October 6, because the Grand Council will be tasked with foreign policy, and [it is not advisable] to solidify situations that, for now, have never been defined in diplomatic documents.

But in the days that followed, when Perth pointed out to him that, while Chamberlain agreed in principle, he needed time—at least until November 1—to obtain the approval of the Cabinet and

Parliament, he raised no objection; and—while Mussolini, receiving a delegation from the Imperial War Graves Commission, proclaimed his friendship for England 205 —he showed himself to be conciliatory to the point of allowing British observers to monitor, on the ships and in Naples, the withdrawal of the “volunteers,” and of not opposing the request to support, through Franco, a visit by the secretary of the Non-Intervention Commission, who was tasked with urging Franco to accept the plan drawn up by the Commission itself 206. And, after November 1 had passed, he waited patiently for the British internal procedures for implementing the agreements to run their course.

Meanwhile, on October 8, the Grand Council had heard a report from Ciano on the new political phase brought about by Munich. Unfortunately, we have very little information about the meeting. Ciano, in his diary, left us no details, except that Mussolini had praised his report, calling it “interesting, precise, and at times dramatic” 207. De Bono’s diary is also virtually silent on the matter, unless one wishes to attribute to the October 8 meeting a note made nearly two weeks later, in which the Quadrumvir, referring to the foreign policy implemented by Mussolini and Ciano (“I’ll say right away that in foreign policy, Mussolini is the man who sees and succeeds. Despite this excessive pro-German stance...”), quotes this statement by the “Duce”: “We can pursue true imperial policy only in agreement with England” 208. The only diary that is less laconic is Bottai’s, in which we read 209:

A long, clear exposition by Galeazzo on the international situation. Particularly interesting was the breakdown of negotiations with France: the demand for the withdrawal of volunteers from Spain—toward which a policy of indifference was to have been implemented—and the claim to intervene between Italy and the British Empire in the Red Sea and the Arab world were, among the 12 points presented, unacceptable. Moreover, the French were giving the negotiations an anti-German tone. He mentions the request made to Germany to explicitly disassociate itself from South Tyrol by dissolving its pro-Tyrol irredentist associations. Göring, having been asked to do so, took decisive personal action in this regard. So far, no formal alliance treaty binds us to Germany. A detailed and vivid description of the Sudeten crisis and the Munich Agreement. One sentence: “Benes has made his position clear: ‘Better the Anschluss than the Habsburgs.’”

Mussolini then speaks. I note some key phrases: “With the Reds’ crossing to the other side of the Ebro, Franco did not lose the war. No. But he lost something more: victory.” “Munich means: the end of communism in Europe; the end of the League of Nations.” “We are witnessing the decline of Franco-British influence in Europe.” “France is a second-rate power.” “War, during the Czechoslovak crisis, was geographically impossible.” “Two lessons: a people can only rely on itself; a people is not defeated unless it feels defeated.” “The Axis is not yet popular in Italy.”

From this note, it seems reasonable to deduce two things above all: that at the Grand Council meeting on October 8, rather than discussing the future prospects of Fascist foreign policy, an assessment was made of the immediate past; and that—despite the show of goodwill from Paris with its decision to recognize Firn without any quid pro quo—yet without knowing the terms on which the Quai d’Orsay intended to resume negotiations for the normalization of relations between the two countries—Mussolini had decided that there should be no continuity whatsoever between the negotiations of the previous months and the new ones, and that instead everything should start from scratch, on new terms, dictated this time by Italy. To these two conclusions, given how quickly relations with France developed, a third can be added: convinced a) that he had much more time at his disposal than the course of international events between Munich and the outbreak of World War II actually allowed; b) that France would not agree to make concrete concessions unless it found itself with its back against the wall, Mussolini must have considered a rapid and relaxed start to negotiations with Paris to be inopportune.

It is not difficult to understand the reasons behind Mussolini's stance. First of all, he needed to buy time so that, before beginning negotiations, he could form a clearer picture of how relations with England would unfold and whether he could count on London's help to persuade the French to accept his demands—and, likely, to see if it would be possible to align Italy's colonial claims with the actions Germany seemed intent on taking to advance its own. Nor can it be ruled out that he hoped the end of the Popular Front—now clearly imminent—might bring about a shift in French policy that would work in his favor. But, apart perhaps from the first, these must be considered secondary motivations. Given the man's character, greater weight must have been carried by his irritation—if anything—at the far-from-benevolent attitude toward Italy displayed by many French newspapers, their refusal to give credence to the "spirit of Munich," and their calls for a serious policy of military buildup against the threat of totalitarian states. Three other motivations, however, must have been decisive. The first was domestic policy: the desire to first subject the Italians to a "salutary" dose of "Gallophobia," so as to dampen their enthusiasm for peace and for the news of France's recognition of the empire and, consequently, their hopes for an imminent clearing of the political horizon—including with France—and for a softening of the pro-German policy.[211] The second was more directly linked to future negotiations: to precede their start with a phase of "psychological" preparation outside the diplomatic sphere that would serve, on the one hand, to put on the table—indirectly but unequivocally—a series of demands far more onerous than those it would bring to the negotiating table, so as to then appear moderate and conciliatory, and, on the other hand, to make it clear to Paris that Fascist Italy—now fully aware of its new international "role"—regarded the acceptance of its minimum demands as the litmus test of the sincerity of its intentions regarding future Italian-French relations and would never renounce them, even at the cost of continued tension between the two countries. It was necessary for Paris to be convinced of this, but the same applied—and, all things considered, even more so—to London and Berlin: the Italian-French negotiations would also serve as a litmus test of their true attitude toward Italy. France was not England, with which Italy dealt as an equal, from empire to empire; France had to convince itself that it was no longer a true empire and acknowledge—as Mussolini would say on March 26 of the following year—the new balance of power, "since relations between states are relations of power, and these relations of power are the determining factors of their policy"212.

211 Ibid., p. 192. Reporting on the news of the French decision to accredit its own ambassador, Ciano wrote: "The news leaves us fairly indifferent. It is good that the French have capitulated, but we do not want this to stir up anti-fascist sentiment among some Italians."

And at this point, the second rationale converged, practically merging with the third—that of an ideological-programmatic nature, so to speak—concerning the long and very long-term nature of Fascist foreign policy, which Mussolini was already formulating in his mind and which, as we have seen, he would present to the Grand Council on the night of February 4–5, 1939, as a sort of legacy to future generations.

The best confirmation of what we are saying lies in two campaigns launched in the weeks immediately following the Grand Council meeting and before the arrival in Rome of the new French ambassador. One, the campaign for the repatriation of Italians residing in France and French North Africa, was aimed at stirring up and promoting—especially in Tunisia—a sort of irredentism among the Italians living and working there, and at demonstrating that they would be victims of persecution by the Paris government and the Italo-phobia of the French.[2B] The other—launched by the Ministry of Popular Culture and subsequently supported, by order of Mussolini2M, by the party—was aimed at challenging France over its "refusal" to embrace the "spirit of Munich," its rearmament, and even its plans for preventive war; and, above all, to bring to the fore Italy's "historical" claims against France and to

demonstrate that country's equally "historical" hostility toward Italy. The development of this second campaign215 quickly took on unprecedented dimensions and tones. Launched by the major newspapers normally used by Palazzo Chigi and Palazzo Venezia as unofficial mouthpieces and for their polemical outbursts against this or that politician or foreign newspaper, it gradually spread to the entire daily press —and first and foremost to that directly controlled by the PNF[26]—before spreading to periodicals as well and finally finding expression at virtually every level in the form of conferences, pamphlets, and books, involving just about everyone—from the most authoritative and well-known political commentators, such as Gayda, Gray, and Canevari, to lesser-known columnists and journalists; from some of the regime's leading figures, such as Farinacci, to esteemed scholars like Salata, Rota, and Volpe.[217] Central themes: Italian-French relations and France's hostility toward Italy from the time of the French Revolution onward; France's systematic failure to acknowledge Italy's contribution to World War I; France's refusal, at the war's end, to grant Italy the colonial compensation to which it was entitled, France's failure to honor the agreements reached in January 1935 between Mussolini and Laval, sanctions, and, above all, Italian rights and claims—first and foremost those concerning Tunisia and Nice, and then those regarding Corsica, Savoy, Djibouti, and the administration of the Suez Canal. It was continually fueled by new developments drawn from French domestic and international political news, from events in Tunisia (both regarding Italians residing there and concerning the conflicts between French authorities and the local nationalist movement[218]), by the responses of political figures and the press across the Alps, and, underlying it all, above all by the concerns raised at Palazzo Chigi by the emergence of a possible Franco-German rapprochement (which materialized in von Ribbentrop's visit to Paris and the short-lived joint declaration of December 6[219]) and by Berlin's evasive stance toward Italian claims, the campaign eventually took on such a tone—especially after Ciano's speech to the Chamber of Deputies on November 30—that about ten days after that speech Mussolini felt compelled to issue instructions to have it "hushed up a bit," since, as he told Ciano 220, "if we continue at this pace, we'll have to let the cannons speak, and the time for that has not yet come." And yet, despite this, it did not cease at all and continued for a long time with sudden surges (such as when, in mid-January 1939, *L'Ordre* wrote that ten Italian soldiers were "barely enough" for one French conscript), to which, according to the French ambassador in Rome, Mussolini's personal contribution—whether through his pen or direct inspiration—was likely not unrelated.[221] The result was not only to create a state of permanent tension between the two countries but also to leave a certain mark on the minds of at least a portion of the Italian population, so much so that when Mussolini told Ciano it was advisable to cover it up in 1939; R. Farinacci, *Italy and France*, Rome 1939; F. Salata, *The Djibouti Knot*. A Diplomatic History Based on Unpublished Documents, Milan 1939; E. Rota, Italy and France in the Face of History, Milan 1939; G. Volpe, History of Italian Corsica, Milan 1939.

2.6 The PNF's daily newspapers at that time were: the *Corriere Adriatico*, *La Voce di Bergamo*, *La Provincia di Bolzano*, *Il Popolo di Brescia*, *La Provincia di Como*, *La Sentinella d'Italia*, *La Voce di Mantova*, *La Gazzetta*, *La Gazzetta dell'Emilia*, "Il Corriere Emiliano," "La Scure," "Il Solco Fascista," "Il Polesine Fascista," "Il Brennero," "Il Popolo del Friuli," "La Vedetta Fascista," "Il Popolo di Sicilia," "L'Isola," "Il Popolo di Trieste," "Il Resto del Carlino," and "San Marco."

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2.8 Various contacts between Tunisian nationalist elements of the Neodestur and Italian intelligence and propaganda services (Radio Bari) date back to this period. The local press also mentioned some of these contacts; see, for example, D. S., "While Habib Bourghiba Negotiates with Fascist Italy…," in *La Défense Sociale*, March 30, 1938. For further details, see ASAE, Tunisia, "Political Reports 1938," pp. 9–

221 DDF, Series II, XIII, p. 813. One such case, recalled by A. François-Poncet in his *Au Palais Farnèse. Souvenirs d'une ambassade à Rome 1938–1940*, Paris 1961, pp. 38 ff., is confirmed in G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 240.

Furthermore, he also expressed his satisfaction with the "results of the survey of Italian public opinion regarding France" 222. And that he was not mistaken is confirmed by some observations made by the French ambassador to the Holy See in a dispatch dated January 17, 1939. According to Charles-Roux, Italian public opinion was not yet in step with the government's foreign policy; it was neither pro-German nor pro-French, and above all, it did not want a war. "Nevertheless, it is inevitable that such intense brainwashing will have some effect," particularly the conviction that France was indebted to Italy. Hence his pessimistic but realistic conclusion: should matters come to a head, one should not delude oneself about the possibility of internal opposition. "The habit of servitude is so deeply ingrained, and above all the organization of tyranny is so perfect, that one must admit it is likely the country will passively allow itself to be swept into an adventure it actually abhors, free to react afterward if the adventure does not go as predicted" 223.

In this atmosphere, heated to a fever pitch, the new French ambassador, André François-Poncet—transferred from Berlin for this purpose and preferred by Léger over L. Noél, who was considered too pro-Italian and too closely tied to pro-Italian circles in Paris 224—first arrived in Rome on November 7, followed by the initial contacts. As if to "welcome" François-Poncet and cover their bases, two days earlier the influential and semi-official *Relazioni internazionali* had published an article.[225]

223 François-Poncet had also expressed the same opinion a month earlier in a lengthy report devoted to the Italian situation and policy. See ibid., pp. 237 ff.

224 A note from Prof. Louis Aubert of the French delegation to the League of Nations, addressed to Daladier on November 16, 1938 (DDF, Series II, XII, pp. 579 ff., and in particular pp. 397 ff.), in which, following the opening statement "if Italy is necessary to our security, we are even more necessary to hers," the text reads, among other things: "Between Italy and France—which can do each other great harm but can also greatly strengthen each other's security—there would be all the elements of a general political agreement, and the terms of the instructions given in 1933 to Henri de Jouvenel, 'Establishment of the principles of a lasting understanding that will align the interests of the two countries for a long time,' could still serve as guidance for François-Poncet. Of course, there could never be any question of an alliance with Italy—in the sense that it has often defined and proposed, and which finds surprising credence in our public opinion—an alliance of sufficient stature to stand up to Germany or England. "For us, an alliance with Italy can only be a temporary arrangement; it is a complementary relationship." That said, the conclusion was that such an agreement could not be reached quickly and that "it would be futile and costly to try to break up the Axis. We must wait for it to break up." And, in the meantime, we must not accept the idea of a "four-power pact" and instead aim for an agreement like the Anglo-Italian one. If, ultimately, Italy had rejected it and had not withdrawn its "volunteers" from Spain, the only option left would have been to open the border with Spain and thus provide concrete assistance to the Republicans. Further useful details also emerge from the accounts of the Anglo-French talks in Paris on November 24, 1938; see DDF, vol. II, XII, pp. 735 ff. and DBFP, vol. III, III, pp. 285 ff.

which, having made it abundantly clear that "from 1922 to the present, relations between France and Italy have been abysmal, in accordance with the wishes of the successive French governments that have led the country" and having urged the new ambassador to "understand the will of, [and] identify with

the spirit of the Italian people," outlined three key points for a potential agreement. First: if, as it seemed, the French were thinking of concluding a pact with Italy similar to the Italian-British one, they should put that idea out of their minds; likewise, they should not consider reviving the agreements of '35, which had by then been "consigned to the archives." Second: the issues to be resolved were those concerning Tunis, Djibouti, and the Suez Canal tolls. Third: "Just as France no longer has any business on the continent due to that solid structure to which it fruitfully contributed with its vivid and tenacious anti-Italian sentiment, so too in the Mediterranean it has nothing to rely on but Italian approval, and it must remember that in the Red Sea the keys are now in Italian hands." And a week later, as the records show, Gayda reiterated in *Giornale d'Italia* No. 226 that the French idea of concluding an agreement similar to the one Italy had concluded with England—which was coming into effect at that very moment—was "outdated," prevented by the inconsistency of French policy and the domestic situation in France, characterized by economic and financial tensions and the escalation of extremist movements. While such was the general atmosphere and such was the reception from unofficial spokespeople, the particular, almost surreal atmosphere of the initial contacts was quite the opposite. It is true that Mussolini made François-Poncet (whom, moreover, he disliked 227) wait a long time before receiving him on his inaugural visit, but the king was "extremely amiable and courteous" toward him, and Ciano proved to be the same during their first meeting 228. And when, on November 29, Mussolini finally received him, he was straightforward, natural, and amiable. He told him that he hoped for the restoration of "normal" mutual relations between the two countries and attributed the difficulties of recent times to the Spanish question. His, he said, was a policy of peace and direct agreement among the four great powers:

These positions, which corresponded to the stance of Palazzo Chigi, and the more radical stance of the press—which was not directly controlled and was intended to shape "the atmosphere." See, in particular, "Count Ciano's Speech: Mussolini and Europe" (December 3, 1938), in which there is no mention whatsoever of Italian territorial claims; "France and the Natural Aspirations of the Italian People" (December 10, 1938), in which these aspirations are specified with regard to both Tunisia ("France can retain Tunisia with Italian cooperation..."), Djibouti, and the Suez Canal, and "Not Even an Inch" by Mr. Bonnet (December 24, 1938), which comments on the French refusal to take these aspirations into consideration.

These are precisely the objectives of Italian policy. It has never had any others. I have long advocated direct understanding among the four Western powers, but you have fiercely opposed this idea. There has been talk of a "butchers' club." But it is quite clear that, if these powers come to an understanding, war will become impossible in Europe, and peace will be assured for a long time.

And as he took his leave, he returned to what he had previously said about the internal crisis in France and the need for it to be resolved soon: "We await what the coming days will bring to France," and, after François-Poncet interjected, "Be confident and patient," he concluded, "I know what patience is; no one is more capable of it than I am." So much so that the ambassador, in a supplementary report to the first one—sent the same day to Bonnet 230—observed:

I have detected no signs of ill will or hostile intentions in Mr. Mussolini. His language was marked neither by ulterior motives nor by mistrust, nor by bitterness, nor by threats... It seemed to me that the Duce is committed to the idea of an alliance among the Western powers—for which, incidentally, he has claimed credit—and that he does not in the least consider the Munich Agreements to be without a future.

François-Poncet's first impressions had not, all things considered, been overly negative. The fierce anti-

French campaign waged by the fascist press had appeared to him for what it really was—namely, dictated by domestic political considerations and aimed at clarifying Italy's demands—and he had become convinced that, in the end, Mussolini would be satisfied with very little.[231] His first meeting with Mussolini certainly could not have caused him to change his mind. What happened the next day in the Chamber of Deputies at the end of Ciano's speech—delivered to take stock of Italy's position during the Czechoslovak crisis—and which he listened to, having been expressly invited by Ciano himself, from the gallery reserved for the diplomatic corps, must therefore have struck him like a bolt from the blue.

As he neared the conclusion of a speech that was essentially moderate and innocuous—one that merely repeated the official line ("fine words; gross and criminal lies about military preparations," as De Bono would note in his diary 232)—Ciano said 233:

230 DDF, vol. II, XII, p. 840. In his book *Au Palais Farnese* (cited above), pp. 18 ff., A. François-Poncet recounts the conversation in roughly the same terms, except that, after noting Mussolini's demeanor as "simple, natural, and perfectly polite," he adds: "The feelings he harbored toward me and my country were certainly hostile. But one must admit that he concealed them well."

The development of the European situation following Munich and Vienna has made it possible to assert that a clearing has appeared on the political horizon. Fascism, which has demonstrated through its actions its unwavering calm in times of storm, does not alter its stance even when significant signs of improvement are discernible in the air. Just as we do not allow ourselves to be shaken by the panic-stricken outbursts of alarmism, so too do we shun dangerous bouts of unbridled optimism—without, on the other hand, allowing this to prevent us from acknowledging with satisfaction every genuine, fruitful, and peaceful achievement. Among these, we note, first and foremost, the recent entry into force of the Easter Pact, which places political relations between Italy and Great Britain on a foundation of solid and friendly cooperation. The Italian-British agreements—so closely linked to the names and work of Neville Chamberlain, Lord Halifax, and Lord Perth—do not in any way represent a mere return to traditional friendship, as it was understood in times very different from the present. Rather, they constitute a set of agreements that, taking into account the new realities in Europe, the Mediterranean, and Africa, regulate relations between the two empires on the basis of the most absolute moral, political, and military equality.

The entry into force of the Easter Pact represented a tangible and concrete contribution to the consolidation of peace. This consolidation is and will remain the paramount objective of our policy, and we will pursue it with tenacity and realism, combined with the prudence that is indispensable when seeking to safeguard, with unyielding firmness, the interests and natural aspirations of the Italian people.

At this point, upon the mention of the interests and natural aspirations of the Italian people, the "incident" suddenly occurred. Applause and shouts rose from various groups of deputies, each seeking to specify their own: Tunis, Corsica, Nice, Savoy, Djibouti. Given the venue and, moreover, the presence of François-Poncet, this was more of a provocation than a demonstration. And indeed, everyone—in Italy, abroad, and especially in France—regarded it as such. This was all the more so because, as François-Poncet immediately observed when reporting the incident to Paris,[4] "coming after the ardent tributes to England, it had an even more significant and shocking character for us."

Two days later, as the first demonstrations against Italy began in various French cities (demonstrations that would be met for several days by student counter-demonstrations in Italy235) the French

ambassador went to see Ciano to ask for an explanation of the incredible incident 236 and to find out, in light of it, whether the Italian government still considered the agreements of January 1935—which, among other things, regulated the Tunisian question—to be in force, and whether it believed they could still serve as the basis for relations between the two countries. Ciano, in a very courteous manner, replied that “the government cannot take responsibility for slogans shouted by Fascists, whether they were shouted in the parliamentary chamber or in public squares. It merely takes note of them as a clear indication of the Italian people’s state of mind.” And he denied that the demonstration had been organized. As for the question regarding the Mussolini-Laval agreements, he said that, before answering, he would have to consult Mussolini, but that, speaking in a personal capacity, he felt compelled to point out that they “had been concluded under assumptions that were not subsequently confirmed in practice,” so that he wondered “whether the entire matter should not be further examined in a new light.” At the same time, however, he added that, once the Spanish affair was settled, there would be nothing but “minor irritations” between the two countries 237. According to Ciano’s diary 238, after the official part of the meeting, François-Poncet reportedly emphasized that France is not a country that has sunk so low as to be able to constantly demand “a pound of flesh” from him. As he was leaving, he asked me if he could continue unpacking his trunks. Then he said, “It would be nice to live in peace in Rome.” I replied coldly, “That will depend on you,” and after a pause, smiling, “And on us, too.” He left my room as pale as a sheet of paper.

235 On the purely student nature of these demonstrations, see G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 223. More interesting are the reports from party informants and confidants, who very often openly acknowledged the indifference and hostility of the vast majority of the population toward them. Take, for example, this report dated December 21, 1938: “I witnessed student demonstrations in Vicenza, Padua, and Venice in response to French provocations. I must say frankly that these demonstrations were imbued more with the usual student spirit (at best) than with an understanding of our just cause vis-à-vis France.

“It pains me to point out to you that I have observed this sense of incomprehension in everyone and everywhere. Moreover, the participation of the various social classes (the middle class, as usual, being absolutely opposed) in the demonstrations in Rome is extremely limited.

“The general impression is that the people are weary, that they fear wars and economic collapse. It is even strange how our old friction with our so-called Latin sister has been completely forgotten.

Regarding these two episodes—the demonstration in the Chamber of Deputies on November 30 and the Ciano–François-Poncet meeting on December 2—the Italian-French rapprochement, as we shall see shortly, effectively foundered. Before proceeding further, however, it is necessary to pause for a moment and ask ourselves what lay behind the first episode.

We have seen in the preceding pages the reasons why Mussolini must have wanted negotiations with Paris to be preceded by “appropriate” preparation of the domestic and international climate.

“The current movement has come like a bolt from the blue, without adequate preparation to shape the mood of the people.

“Of course, there is also a certain sense of optimism, as always stemming from the people’s absolute trust in their Leader” (ACS, PNF, Political Situation in the Provinces, “Padua”).

236 As soon as he heard the news of what had happened, Bonnet had telegraphed François-Poncet to ask Ciano for an explanation and had specified: “It goes without saying that if Count Ciano’s reply were to indicate that he does not entirely reject the demands that have been expressed, you will leave no doubt as to the consequences that the French government will have to draw from this in determining its overall political position regarding Italy” (DDF, vol. II, XIII, pp. 3 ff.).

An entry in Ciano’s diary dated November 8, 239, and above all Mussolini’s statements to the Grand Council on the evening of November 30 and the night of February 4–5, ’39—which we discussed in Chapter 3—in turn enable us to ascertain with precision his long-term plans regarding France. Finally, a letter he had Ciano write to Grandi on November 14—on the eve of the “Easter Agreements” coming into effect—allows us to determine his short-term plans as well. It reads as follows (p. 240):

It is clear that now, given that the political, military, and even geographical conditions of our country have fundamentally changed, future talks with France cannot be resumed on the basis of the past. The demands that we once kept hidden in our hearts can now, in the short term, be brought to the table. There are three fundamental points of our policy toward France: Tunisia, Djibouti, and the Suez Canal.

As for Tunisia, it is inconceivable to return to discussing what were once known as the Laval Agreements. We are on an entirely different level. We intend to significantly, decisively, and definitively improve the position of our working masses, who have represented—and continue to represent—the sole vital force of the white race in that region. This is not a matter of simply demanding territorial cession, as some newspapers are already reporting. We are content, at least initially, to achieve a form of joint administration that allows for the secure and fruitful development of our activities.

As for Djibouti, the situation is even clearer. What does that port represent, severed from the Empire? It is clear that we cannot continue to enrich French organizations and companies with our labor and our trade. Therefore, certain points must be established: the railroad must be entirely Italian; the port must be administered jointly by the two countries. Here, too, in practice, we must arrive at a form of joint administration. If this were not the case, we would have to redirect our economic and trade flows in a very different way, and the port of Djibouti, deprived of the lifeblood it receives from Italy and the Empire, would quickly become a dead leaf.

The third point concerns the Suez Canal. Now that our traffic to the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific has multiplied so rapidly, we do not intend—I repeat, we do not intend—to remain subject to the exorbitant exploitation of the Suez Canal Company. Any project eventually becomes public property. All the more so if the capital invested in it has been repaid at a rate that can be described as a thousand times usurious. We are not asking for that. But we firmly insist that the Canal’s tariffs be subject to a review and

239 “The Duce, in his briefing, outlined for me the parameters of what our future policy must be: ‘Objectives: Djibouti, perhaps through a joint administration and neutralization. Tunisia, under a more or less similar regime; Corsica, Italian, never Frenchified, and therefore to be brought under direct control; the border at the Varo. I am not interested in Savoy, which is neither historically nor geographically Italian. These are the broad outlines of our claims. I am not setting a timeframe of one, five, or ten years. Time will be determined by events. However, always keep these goals in mind” (G. Ciano, Diary, op. cit., p. 209).

that the rates be fair and honest. All countries with an interest in trade with the East cannot help but share our point of view and our just demand.

I am writing these things to you, dear Dino, not only so that you may be informed of the future direction of our foreign policy, but also because I am asking for your cooperation starting now. The Duce wishes that you, in whatever manner you deem appropriate and with your own unique skill, begin to make it clear to the British that these issues are of concern to us and that no one should be surprised if, at a certain point, we bring them squarely into the discussion. It is not a matter of taking a "step." It is enough to drop the subject at the right moment. To give the impression that something must happen in this regard. To prepare—if not actually to lay the groundwork—British public opinion for such demands. I cannot tell you now when and how all this will happen: we will see as events unfold. But it is certain that the Duce has now set these goals for himself, and that alone is enough to say that they will be achieved.

Even having already noted that Mussolini had counted on having much more time than he actually had to carry out his political plans, upon reading this letter one is led to wonder why the demonstration on November 30 took place, when the objectives intended to be achieved through prior preparations had already been met, and when it must have been evident that such a sensational act—one that defied all the rules of international relations—could only jeopardize the start of negotiations and, moreover, create difficulties even with the British, whom, as the letter itself makes clear, they intended to win over in an entirely different way. Is it possible that Mussolini and Ciano—if they were indeed the ones who organized the demonstration, as everyone thought at the time and as is still believed today—did not realize that it would cause their short-term objectives to fade away or be significantly delayed? Or must we conclude that, despite this, they wanted it for some other reason that is not immediately apparent?

Various hypotheses were immediately put forward. Some believed that Mussolini had wanted to dramatize the situation as much as possible so that he could then negotiate from a position of strength, with German support and British mediation; others, however, thought he was aiming to provoke a new conference of the four great powers—a new Munich—in anticipation of which the demonstration on November 30 would have served as a sort of Godesberg241.1 for him, in France, Germany, and England, however, they believed that the demonstration was essentially directed against Germany. That is, that Mussolini had resorted to it in a last-ditch attempt to make Berlin understand that he could not accept the Franco-German rapprochement that seemed to be taking shape in those days and that, if realized, would make it impossible for him to force

Paris to accept his terms in order to reach an agreement with him. Hence his decision to go for broke 242. This second hypothesis has also been largely adopted in historiography by Toscano and Pastorelli 243. In reality, even though there is no doubt that the Franco-German rapprochement was unwelcome in Rome, this hypothesis (like the others, for that matter) raises many doubts. Countering it is Ciano's note from that very same day: "Nothing had been prepared. The deputies spontaneously expressed their aspirations, which are those of the people" 244, though this is partially undermined by the fact that the demonstration was certainly organized. There is no doubt about this. And too many reports agree in attributing its organization to Starace, who was also seen in the Montecitorio chamber urging the deputies to join in the chants 245. Beyond Ciano's immediate account, however, there is what Mussolini stated in the Grand Council more than two months later—namely, that the demonstration, though "in the air," had been "unexpected," unplanned, and harmful to Fascist politics. This statement, therefore, could undoubtedly have been dictated by the "Duce's" desire (who, at the time, seems to have even been pleased with the demonstration 246) to justify the mistake he had made and shift the

blame onto others; nevertheless, it cannot be ignored—especially since, if the demonstration had been organized on Mussolini's instructions, it is difficult to understand why —given that the package of demands intended for the negotiating table had already been broadly defined and made public—the deputies and the "public" in the galleries added to those demands others, such as Corsica and even Savoy, which the package did not include or which Mussolini ruled out both for the present and for the future. Thus—based on the available documentation—it is perhaps more prudent to assume that Mussolini and Ciano were not lying, at least regarding their involvement in planning the demonstration, and that it had been organized by Starace out of excessive zeal and without a clear understanding of Mussolini's political programs and their timelines 247.

In D. Grandi's memoirs, we read the following on this subject: "Ciano always told me afterward, whenever I asked him to explain how things had gone, that he knew nothing about it and that the demonstration had taken him by surprise. He made this statement immediately afterward to the ambassadors of France and England and ordered me to do the same in London... To others, he admitted that everything had been organized and prepared in advance. Perhaps this was mere boasting. But everyone believed it."

246 G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 219. François-Poncet, in his aforementioned account of the session (DDF, vol. II, XIII, pp. 1 ff.), wrote: "I had the impression that [Mussolini], while not appearing surprised, nevertheless signaled that [the demonstration] should not be prolonged."

Whoever conceived it, one thing is certain: the demonstration on November 30 led to the failure of both France's attempts to improve relations with Italy and Mussolini's plans to take advantage of France's difficulties to achieve the first part of his demands against it. Amid the climate of heightened tension and hostility that the event sparked in France, Ciano's negative response on December 17 to the question posed to him fifteen days earlier by François-Poncet regarding whether the Mussolini-Laval agreements were valid for Italy, along with the French reply of December 25—so blunt and precise (even though Ciano described it in his diary as "mild" 248)—surprised and disappointed even the British (according to François-Poncet, Perth had until then been of the opinion that, all things considered, an agreement would be possible and had judged the Italian claims "moderate and reasonable" 249)—who were hoping for a détente and had sought to temper Paris's reactions—and Daladier's trip to Corsica and Tunisia in the early days of the new year, during which the French prime minister had loudly reiterated his "jamais" to the Italian claims (which, incidentally, he had already expressed in more parliamentary but no less explicit terms in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate on December 13 and 19)—thereby arousing the ire of the fascist press—in fact brought relations between the two countries to a complete stalemate and to a point of tension where any talk of a rapprochement was unthinkable. And in this climate, the visit to Rome by Chamberlain and Halifax from January 11 to 14, 1939, served very little purpose. In the conversations between the two British statesmen and Mussolini and Ciano, the issue was handled with caution by both sides. The British expressed their deep regret over the situation, all the more so because, as Chamberlain told Mussolini, "after 1935, the British government believed that there was no longer any matter of controversy between Rome and Paris." The Italians stated that, "as things stand," they neither desired nor sought "intervention or mediation" and that they believed "that once the Spanish Civil War is over, it will be possible to resolve the existing dispute directly through talks with France" 250. The same view was

247 The accounts by R. Guariglia, *Ricordi*, op. cit., p. 365; and by F. Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al lago di Garda*, op. cit., pp. 90 ff., according to which Mussolini himself had wanted the demonstration,

are too vague and secondhand to be taken seriously.

reiterated, after the meetings concluded, in *Informazione diplomatica* no. 26

The dispatches from François-Poncet and Charles-Roux regarding the Italian-British meetings in Rome clearly reveal a certain irritation at the excessive confidence and optimism that, in their view, Chamberlain and Halifax had shown toward Italian good faith 252. Nevertheless, it is likely that the fact that Mussolini had spoken of the possibility of resolving the "dispute" after the end of the Spanish Civil War—combined with certain information gathered by the embassy in Rome from an "important" member of thePNF—according to which Mussolini feared new moves by Hitler and was therefore in a hurry to resolve the matter one way or another, even on terms not too onerous for France 253—may have resonated to some extent in Paris. If nothing else, this may have prompted Daladier and Bonnet to try to gain a clearer understanding of Mussolini's intentions. Only in this way, it seems to us, can we explain their decision to entrust, a few days after Chamberlain and Halifax's visit, the director of the Bank of Indochina, Paul Baudouin (a figure well known in Rome who, years earlier, had met Mussolini twice and who, in the preceding days, had been approached on this matter—through the managing director of the Djibouti Salt Works Company—by Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Teruzzi), with the task of secretly contacting Rome (even François-Poncet was kept completely in the dark) to sound out its intentions 254.

On February 2 and 3, Baudouin met with Ciano, who summarized the first of the two conversations in his diary as follows 255:

Daladier does not intend to make any explicit territorial concessions: if we were to demand territories, it would mean war. However, he is willing to make the following concessions: a large free zone in Djibouti; participation in the administration of the port; transfer to Italy of the railway in Ethiopian territory; support for our demands regarding Suez; and a revision of the 1935 agreements concerning Tunis, provided that there is no intention of turning Tunisia into "the Italian Sudetenland." I made it clear that, regarding Tunis, we are asking for one thing: the right for Italians to remain Italian. I reserved my response until after reporting to the Duce.

Mussolini considered the proposal "interesting." "As things stand," Ciano noted, "there are only two alternatives: either negotiate on these terms, postponing a comprehensive solution to the problem until a more propitious time, or tackle it immediately. But then it will be war." The "Duce" authorized the continuation of the survey, but insisted that the Germans also be informed 256. It is unclear whether they were already aware of it; according to Ciano, however, it was they who leaked the news to the French opposition press ("Le Populaire," "L'humanité," "L'ordre"), which spun a vigorous campaign against the government out of it; this, together with the onset of the second Czechoslovak crisis, led Daladier on March 20 to suspend the operation—at least for the time being—which, had it not been for these two events, Bonnet would have been inclined to carry forward 257.

Although this is significant for understanding how, despite everything, Italian-French relations at that time were not in fact entirely compromised, and Mussolini would have been satisfied with very little in order to steer them in a direction consistent with his plans, it is doubtful that, even if it had been carried out, the "Baudouin mission" could have truly altered the course of Fascist foreign policy at that point. The fact that Mussolini, for his part, authorized its continuation should not be misleading: the decision is, in fact, typical of his modus operandi—his tendency to always keep all doors open behind him. What matters is that by early February 1939, when Baudouin made contact with Ciano, it was already too late to truly influence the "Duce's" policy.

At the end of the Munich Conference, von Ribbentrop had once again pressed Ciano for the alliance. The proposal he had presented was different from previous ones, but its aim was the same. It was no longer a bilateral alliance, but—as the German foreign minister told his Italian counterpart upon handing it over 258—the "greatest thing in the world," a trilateral alliance: Germany, Italy, and Japan. As we have seen, Mussolini and Ciano had long been considering closer ties with Japan, both as a simple threat to "soften up" London and as an effective tool against it in the event that an agreement with England proved unfeasible. And in line with this logic, there had also been contacts with Tokyo and with Berlin, which had taken the matter in hand and pursued it until, precisely during the decisive days of the Czechoslovak crisis, it agreed on a draft three-way alliance pact—the very one handed to Ciano in Munich. The Italian response, however, had been cool. "I believe we will study it very carefully and, perhaps, set it aside for some time," Ciano had immediately noted 260. At that moment, Ciano—and even more so Mussolini—wanted anything but to rush things. The "Duce," in particular, was, as we have seen, developing entirely different plans, which did not include an alliance with Germany. Negotiations to finalize the pact's draft had therefore continued, but with minds essentially focused elsewhere. And relations with Berlin themselves had entered a phase of apparent great cordiality and dynamism—one need only think of the great fanfare surrounding the Vienna Arbitration (November 2, 1938), through which Germany and Italy had resolved the issue of Hungarian claims at the expense of Czechoslovakia—but essentially marked by caution, underlying controversy and rivalry, and even impatience with von Ribbentrop's behavior.[261] On closer inspection, Italy's public stances and initiatives toward Germany had become fewer and less assertive, while those on the German side had remained at previous levels 262.

A trip by von Ribbentrop to Rome in late October—officially to smooth over Italian-German differences regarding Budapest's claims against Prague, but essentially to advocate for the conclusion of the tripartite alliance—had yielded no results. Mussolini had delivered a long speech to the German minister, full of "sympathy," fine words, and assertions—some of which he believed and some of which he used to beat around the bush—but he had replied in the negative. Here is how Ciano recorded it:263

262 This exchange, covering the period from October '38 to January '39, serves as an example at the highest levels of government.

On the Italian side:

October 12: "Diplomatic Bulletin" No. 23. Unconditional approval of Hitler's speech in Saarbrücken. There is nothing to be done against the Italian-German alliance. The only thing left to do is, finally, to make peace.

November 1: Launch of a special EIAR program for Germany. January 25: Farinacci's speech in Berlin.

From the German side:

October 5: Hitler's speech in Berlin. "The man who has stood by Germany as its faithful and great friend: Benito Mussolini."

October 9: Hitler's speech in Saarbrücken. "That Axis, which some countries have at times thought they could make light of, has not only proven enduring over the past two and a half years, but has also

shown itself to be unyielding even in the most difficult hours." "The Duce, the Reich's only true great friend,"

October 21: Goebbels' speech in Hamburg. "It has become clear that Mussolini was and is truly a friend of Germany."

November 6: Hitler's speech in Weimar. "The more united we are with Italy, the less desire they will have to attack us."

November 7: Speaking to the Foreign Press Association in Berlin, Ribbentrop emphasizes the theme of Italian-German friendship.

December 2: The German press gives an "exceptional" reception to Ciano's speech to the Chamber of Deputies on November 30, described by *Corrispondenza politico diplomatica* as "a historic document" and "a guideline and a glimpse into the future"... .

The Duce agrees that within a few years there will be a war between the Axis, France, and England. This is part of the course of history. An irreparable rift has formed between the two worlds. It must be acknowledged that a defensive alliance similar to the one now being proposed by Germany exists between London and Paris. Furthermore, technical contacts are already underway between the General Staffs. Between Italy and Germany, however, there are no written pacts, since the Berchtesgaden Protocols—which addressed contingent issues—can now be considered obsolete. There is the Anti-Communist Pact of Rome, which is predominantly ideological in nature and to which we are deeply committed alongside Japan. However, we must not forget that between Italy and Germany there is solidarity between the regimes, as well as a mutual interest in assisting one another, even if this commitment is not enshrined in an official document. Italy's stance has been clear in the past and will always be so whenever the fate of the two regimes is at stake.

He believes that this alliance must be concluded, but he expresses a specific reservation regarding the timing of when it would be advisable to enter into such a pact. He states that he will speak with the clarity that is due to friends and that he considers the alliance a sacred commitment that must, under any circumstances, be respected and fulfilled one hundred percent. Therefore, an assessment of the situation in Italy is necessary. The Axis is now popular: Italians are proud of this political system, which has already proven itself so formidably in recent world events. However, with regard to the military alliance, public opinion in certain sectors remains unprepared. The Air Force is in favor, the Navy is fairly supportive, and the lower ranks of the Army are in favor, while among the middle ranks and especially the higher ranks, there are still large segments that remain reserved. It is well understood that when the government decides on this alliance, everyone will obey and no objections will be raised.

Farmers and even workers sympathize with Nazi Germany and would welcome any new commitment. The middle class, on the other hand, is less so. The middle class continues to view London with a certain interest, and this is because the middle class mistakenly equates power with wealth. Another reason for the cool reception toward an alliance with Germany would be the struggle

December 24: Hess's Christmas message. "The German people reiterate their thanks to Mussolini and the Italian people."

December 30: Note from the Political-Diplomatic Correspondence on the topic: Germany, Italy, France. German solidarity with Italy.

December 31: New Year's message from the Führer: "The obligations arising from our friendship with Fascist Italy are clear and inviolable to us."

January 8: Visit by Minister of Economics Funk to Italy.

On the Mussolini-Ribbentrop meeting, see also the observations by M. Toscano, *The Diplomatic Origins of the Pact of Steel*, op. cit., pp. 55 ff.

between Nazism and Catholicism, while the Agreement would become very popular if a relaxation of religious tensions were to occur in Germany.

The Duce states that it is his intention to form this alliance once the idea has been allowed to mature sufficiently among the broad masses of the people. Today, it has not yet reached that point. The Italian people have reached the "Axis" phase, but not yet that of a military alliance. They may, however, reach it very quickly.

To these words, perhaps to sugarcoat the pill, Mussolini added that, when the time came, it should not be a defensive alliance that was formed, but an offensive one:

We must not form a purely defensive alliance. There would be no need for one because no one is planning to attack totalitarian states. Instead, we want to form an alliance to redraw the world map.

But to this statement he immediately added what was closest to his heart and what worried him most, given the spread of German influence in Eastern and Southeastern Europe far beyond the terms of the Berchtesgaden and Berlin agreements: "When the alliance between us and Germany appears ready, we will have to set its objectives." The objectives and the conquests. "For our part, we already know where we must go." But Germany...? What were its objectives? Before entering into the alliance, Mussolini wanted to make the matter perfectly clear. And to ensure there were no misunderstandings or deliberate misinterpretations (Mussolini and Ciano had concluded that there were two opposing factions within the Nazi leadership—"Göring, who wants to organize peace, and von Ribbentrop, who intends to prepare for war"2M), the following day he handed the German minister a brief written note summarizing the key points of what he had told him verbally 265. Ciano, in turn, had returned to the subject of a possible consultation pact among the four great powers.

For a couple of months following von Ribbentrop's visit, relations between Rome and Berlin had gone through a period of stagnation. Before making any decision, Mussolini wanted to see how things were progressing with Paris and, above all, with London. If the entry into force of the "Easter Agreements" had yielded the hoped-for results—that is, if it had established the basis for a modus vivendi with England such as to induce the French to accept Italy's conditions for the "normalization" of relations between the two countries—there would have been no reason to push relations with Germany beyond the Axis phase, and this would have been even more true if London had shown itself willing—as, as we have seen, it was requested to do through the "secret channel"—to provide economic aid to Italy and contribute to its efforts to shore up Hungary in order to block German penetration toward the southeast. Significant in this regard are the alarms raised in Rome by reports of a possible Franco-German rapprochement, which would have temporarily blocked Mussolini's policy toward France. These concerns were immediately picked up by all the relevant foreign ministries and explain why they

generally interpreted Ciano's speech on November 30 and the demonstration it sparked as a warning to Berlin; in reality, however, they must have contributed to eliciting an entirely different reaction from the "Duce": that of causing him to tone down his demands on France considerably and convincing him that, for the time being, it was necessary to settle for very little. Far more significant for the purposes of our discussion, however, is the reaction provoked in him by the first reports concerning the Franco-British conference of November 23–24, and in particular by those suggesting that the conference was set to transform the entente between the two countries into a full-fledged alliance. Faced with this prospect—which, far more than the Franco-German rapprochement, would have disrupted and effectively nullified his plans— Mussolini's reaction was to have Attolico telegraph von Ribbentrop "that if such were to be the outcome of the Paris talks, we would consider the remarks made during his recent trip to Rome to be obsolete and would be prepared to finalize the draft military alliance with Germany without the planned amendments." Fortunately, Attolico—partly due to his vast diplomatic experience and knowledge of British reluctance to commit to the continent except in cases of extreme necessity, and partly because he was still convinced that "a new European collaboration could emerge from Munich" 267—and fully realizing that Mussolini's decision would make this impossible—had taken his time in carrying out the instructions he had received, citing the impossibility of meeting with von Ribbentrop for a few days. After that, once the fear had subsided, there was no further talk of agreeing to finalize the alliance 268.

The French reaction to the "scandal" of November 30 and the British stance toward it—formally correct but clearly critical—must have shaken Mussolini's confidence in the feasibility of his plans and reinforced his conviction that the "conception of life"

of totalitarian and democratic states was now so radically different as to make an agreement between them impossible in the long run. One of his anonymous literary-political pieces from those days in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, *Dialogues on the Thames* 269, is indicative of this second point. Before making any decision, however, he had wanted to wait until he could meet with Chamberlain and Halifax and personally gauge their reactions. His behavior on December 15 toward the Japanese ambassador in Berlin, General Oshima, who was passing through Rome, is crystal clear in this regard. Ciano's account of the meeting is extremely interesting, not least for understanding the state of mind with which Rome viewed those who might have been partners in a future alliance. Ciano wrote 270:

I accompanied General Oshima, Japan's Ambassador to Berlin, to see the Duce. His visit had been recommended by Ribbentrop, because Oshima is, like him, a staunch advocate of transforming the Anti-Comintern Pact into a Tripartite Alliance Pact... When he began to speak, I realized why Ribbentrop likes him so much: they are cut from the same cloth—enthusiastic and prone to oversimplification. I do not mean to imply he is simplistic. He attacked Russia and said that Japan intends to dismember it into so many states as to render any thought of revenge futile and absurd; he said that Japan wants to eliminate all British interests from China and, more generally, from the Pacific. He painted a grim picture of the British position in the East Indies. The Duce repeated his usual arguments about the need to delay the transformation of the Pact for some time and indicated the period during which he would make his decisions: from mid-January to mid-February.

The date indicated by Mussolini leaves no room for doubt: for him, everything was now tied to how the talks with the British would unfold.

Deep down, however, Mussolini must have had little hope that they would go as he wished. Despite Perth's optimism—though it was no coincidence that his replacement at the embassy in Rome, Percy Loraine, a "gray" bureaucrat with a "track record" that did not bode well for his friendship toward

Fascist Italy, had been announced in those very days—too many signs, not least the silence that had greeted the overtures made through the “secret channel” and the steps the British—having learned of the proposed tripartite alliance—had taken with American assistance to dissuade Tokyo from pressing ahead with it,271 made it clear that Rome and London would have very little common ground, in the sense intended by Mussolini. Added to this were Daladier’s statements to the French National Assembly and Senate on December 13 and 19 and the announcement of the trip Daladier himself was about to undertake to Corsica and Tunisia—facts that offered no grounds for hope even on the Parisian front of Mussolini’s policy and that led some to fear the worst, to the point —if the report made by a German agent in Berlin in early March 1939 is to be believed 272—that, frightened by the idea of a possible French attack, Pariani and even Badoglio had begun to urge the “Duce” to authorize the start of genuine Italian-German military talks 273. This, incidentally—and it is worth emphasizing—would explain why, once the alliance had been decided, when Mussolini informed Vittorio Emanuele III of it, the sovereign, despite his previous aversion to the Axis, expressed his satisfaction.

269 “Dialogues on the Thames,” published by *Il popolo d’Italia* on December 8, 1938 (Mussolini, XXIX, pp. 213 ff.) imagined a conversation, at the home of a member of the House of Commons, between the Negus and Benes, entirely centered on the political errors that had led them to lose power and, in particular, on their misplaced trust in the British and the French, who had first pushed them against Italy and Germany and then abandoned them. The piece concluded with these words, attributed to the host: “You are the first casualties of a great war currently being waged in the world between two conceptions of life: the totalitarian and the democratic. One battle has been lost, but the struggle is not over”; and with the foreshadowing of the imminent arrival of two other defeated leaders, Chiang Kai-shek and Negrfn.

The piece inspired Ugo Ojetti to write an incredible little letter to Mussolini, conceived as follows: “Allow me, Duce, to express my admiration—for what little it may be worth—for the *Dialogues on the Thames*. From Lucian to Leopardi, this concise genre (with all due respect to Benedetto Croce) is quite difficult and requires long experience, much like good fencing. And you, in one fell swoop...

“I won’t press the matter, for I recall your sharp and amused remark: ‘You’re exaggerating, Ojetti,’ when, in Tripoli in March ’37, I spoke to you about a little impromptu speech of yours...” (acs, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence [192 2-1943], 168/R, file “Ojetti Ugo,” subfile 1, dated December 11, 1938).

He does not like the Germans, but he detests and holds the French in contempt—Ciano reportedly noted, relaying what his father-in-law had told him. He does, however, consider them capable of a coup against us and therefore views the German commitment to military assistance with satisfaction.

The only possibility of retaining some room for maneuver would have been to offer himself to Chamberlain as a mediator between him and Hitler. But a step taken in mid-December in this regard by Magistrati with von Ribbentrop had come to nothing.

To him, on instructions from Rome—as Magistrati recalled, who in those days was standing in for Attolico, who was on Christmas leave 274—I said precisely that the Italian government, having now settled all practical matters with England, was ready to exert all its influence—if requested by Germany and in anticipation of Mr. Chamberlain’s expected and imminent visit to Rome—to improve Anglo-German relations.

The response was not positive. The minister, by then staunchly opposed to London's policy, told me that relations between Berlin and England were "so bad as to make such an attempt seem futile."

With Munich, Mussolini had fortunately—and, on the surface, very brilliantly—landed on his feet, and this success had led him to believe that, through his own skill, he held the future in his grasp. Less than three months after those days, his plans—or, if you will, his dreams—revealed their true nature and the enormous risks inherent in them. The pendulum threatened to stop, forcing him either into isolation or to make a choice. In theory, the choice was between London and Berlin; in reality, it meant siding with Berlin, since, at that point, choosing London would have meant going to Canossa with Paris—with all that this would have entailed for his domestic and international prestige.

Given this situation, the second half of December must have been one of the most dramatic moments of his life, so much so that he even stopped his usual, relaxing phone calls to *Il Popolo d'Italia* to inquire how things were going, offer his observations on the published issues, and give his instructions for those in preparation.[275] Although unwelcome and feared, the alliance with Hitler must have appeared to him, with each passing day and as all other options closed off before him, to be the only door still open to him. And it was a path he had to take immediately, without waiting for the meetings with Chamberlain and Halifax, since doing so after their—for him, by then predictable—failure would only have made his relationship with the Germans more precarious and humiliating. As early as eight days after his meeting with the Japanese ambassador in Berlin, while discussing the upcoming meetings with Chamberlain in Ciano—who had just returned to Rome from Budapest (where he had witnessed both the intensity of anti-German sentiment in that country and the pressure exerted by the Germans)—he made no secret of his "intention" to join "the Tripartite Pact, as proposed by Ribbentrop" 276. Then, taking advantage of the Christmas holidays, he had withdrawn to the solitude of the Rocca delle Camminate to reflect and make his decision. None of his collaborators—except perhaps Ciano—whom he increasingly kept at a distance and in the dark about his thoughts, must have realized the extent of his inner turmoil. The only one who must have understood to some extent that something major was taking shape in his mind was, perhaps, François-Poncet. A report he sent to Bonnet on December 31 at least suggests as much 277:

As the year draws to a close, the Duce's thoughts and plans remain shrouded in mystery. Although there is some reason to believe that the French government's response to Count Ciano's letter—denouncing the January 1935 agreements—may have disconcerted and embarrassed him, Mr. Mussolini has not yet reacted or deemed it appropriate to make his reactions known and to lift the veil covering the positive aspects of his plans. The Italian press sets forth, in the most peremptory and vehement manner, a program of demands that is at once broad and indefinable. Does it involve territorial claims? Does it, in any case, respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of France's possessions? What should be accepted, and what should be rejected? In the claims he advances and the arguments on which he relies, what portion is attributable to tactics, and what portion must be considered essential? No official statement, no unofficial information from a reliable source, indicates this to us.

The dictator's friends and close associates are, moreover, the first to confirm that he surrounds himself with an increasingly impenetrable veil of secrecy, that he is no longer the man he once was, that he has changed greatly, that he no longer receives anyone, and that no one today—except, perhaps, Count Ciano—could say what he is planning or what his ultimate goal is.

One fact, however, seems certain: public discontent. Material living conditions are mediocre. The standard of living of an Italian farmer or worker is lower than that of a Frenchman and even a German.

Moral conditions are equally lacking. Behind the ostentatious fervor of the party organizations, one senses a great deal of disappointment and weariness.

The Rome-Berlin Axis has not gained popularity. Many people realize that Germany has been the main beneficiary of the Axis, that Italy has, so far, gained nothing from it, and that in all instances where the interests of the two countries have clashed—such as in their recent disagreement over the borders of Subcarpathian Russia [jìc]—it is Italy that has had to yield.

It is therefore likely that the Duce is concerned with restoring the situation and is seeking, in the short term, a success that he needs. But where can he find it?

Upon his return from Rocca delle Camminate, the decision had been made. On January 1, Ciano had found him in a foul mood, dissatisfied with how things were going in the AOI, embittered against the Vatican (whose activities through the Catholic Action he saw as an attempt to establish a full-fledged political party ready to take over from fascism) to the point of ruling out any celebration of the upcoming tenth anniversary of the Conciliation, and hostile toward the bourgeoisie 278. At the end of the meeting, he had informed him of his "decision to accept Ribbentrop's proposal to transform the Anti-Comintern Pact into an alliance" 279:

He wants the signing to take place in the last ten days of January. He considers a clash with the Western democracies increasingly inevitable and therefore wants to prepare his forces. This month he intends to prepare public opinion, "which, however, he couldn't care less about."

278 Three days later, on January 4, he ordered Pini to prepare a series of articles for *Il popolo d'Italia* attacking the bourgeoisie, along the lines of his speech to the National Council of the PNF. G. Pini, *Filo diretto con Palazzo Venezia*, op. cit., pp. 185 ff.

The next day, Ciano wrote to von Ribbentrop informing him of the decision. The tone and substance of the letter 280 were quite different from those used by Mussolini in late October in his correspondence with von Ribbentrop himself. There was no mention of any offensive nature of the alliance; on the contrary, there was an explicit statement that the agreement "must be presented to the world as a peace pact, which ensures that Germany and Italy can work in complete tranquility for a sufficiently long period of time." A lengthy attempt was made to deny that the decision reflected "any aspect of our political relations with France," with whom Italy claimed to be confident it could resolve issues of a "contingent nature" (the status of Italians in Tunis, the free port in Djibouti, the operation of the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway, and participation in the administration of the Suez Canal) through normal diplomatic negotiations, "in which, however, we do not intend to take the initiative," and, conversely, an assertion that the reasons were the "now proven existence of a military pact between France and Great Britain," "the prevalence of the warmongering stance among French decision-makers," and "the military preparations of the United States, which aim to provide personnel and, above all, resources to Western democracies in case of need." And, finally, the hope of drawing into the tripartite alliance those countries that "can supply it with raw materials in Europe, namely, primarily: Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Romania."

For the time being, the decision had been kept strictly confidential. Aside from the king—whose reaction we have already mentioned—very few others had been informed, including Starace and Attolico and, in a vague sense, Grandi, both of whom were in Italy for the end-of-year festivities. Attolico, who until then had been "rather hostile" to an alliance with Germany, had shown himself to be "openly in favor"; according to Ciano,281 this was because he was "convinced that nothing would

be more popular among us than a war against France." Grandi had put on a brave face. Thus, Ciano had noted his reaction:2'2:

I made a very vague reference to the future alliance with Germany and observed his reactions. He declared himself in favor and did not believe it would have overly serious repercussions in the British world: it is already a foregone conclusion. And the memory of the Triple Alliance is still fresh—it did not prevent, for thirty years, the maintenance of cordial relations between Italy and Great Britain."

Although kept secret, the decision had obviously weighed heavily on the meetings the following week with Chamberlain and Halifax, contributing to making them appear even more inconclusive—beneath their apparent cordiality—than they might otherwise have been, at least in certain specific respects. Even in terms of cordiality, Chamberlain had outdone Mussolini. In his memoirs, Grandi has left us a portrait that is as heartfelt as it is valuable for capturing the atmosphere:

Those were very sad days. When I saw Chamberlain step off the train with his umbrella at the Rome station, like an ordinary traveler, and Mussolini go to meet him—wearing a military overcoat with Ciano at his side and the legion of the Fascist Militia performing military honors—a Mussolini so different from the one I had seen in Livorno, Rapallo, Florence to greet Sir Austin Chamberlain—wearing a floppy hat, awkward and embarrassed—I wondered if an understanding between two such different mindsets, between two such different spiritual worlds, was still possible. And yet it was still possible. The British guests were hosted royally at Villa Madama, and no expense was spared in their honor with banquets, parties, and ballets. All of Ciano's ceremonial skills, learned in Germany, were put to use. This was a world apart from the British style and from what had been the Italian style in the distant years I knew of up until 1932. The discussions took place at Palazzo Venezia and Palazzo Chigi. I was not invited to participate, nor did anyone inform me of their content. However, from what I later learned upon my return to London from the British delegation itself, I ascertained that the discussions had not gone beyond the vague. Nothing concrete had been decided. At the official banquet at Palazzo Venezia—to which women who were far too beautiful and far too young had been invited—Mussolini addressed Chamberlain with a courteous but formal speech, prepared by P. Chigi. Chamberlain responded with a warm, heartfelt speech. As soon as Chamberlain finished speaking, Mussolini immediately realized that the guests had preferred Chamberlain's speech. I was watching him. I could clearly see that he was annoyed with himself and that, at that moment, he wished he had been just as warm and heartfelt as the cool, reserved British statesman had been. But the speech was already over. Of the entire immense hall packed with guests, the only ones dressed in civilian evening attire were the members of the British delegation, the staff of the British Embassy, and myself. Everyone else was dressed in strange uniforms—white jackets, black trousers, and black shirts—an eyesore. Starace's uniform. Upon my entry into the hall, the Party Secretary had confronted me, saying, "You cannot attend the luncheon unless you are wearing the uniform." I did not have one. I said I was leaving. Ciano intervened. The matter was brought to Mussolini, who consented to my attending anyway. "Provided it's the last time…" Starace told me.

A comparison between the bland nature of the accounts of the talks drafted by Ciano and what the Foreign Minister himself was simultaneously noting in his diary 283 confirms this picture and clearly shows the extent to which the Italian side had misunderstood the British attitude and confused Chamberlain's concern about the gravity of the European situation with a fear of conflict. Consider, for example, these brief excerpts:

During their stay in Rome, Chamberlain and Halifax also met with the Pope. See A. Martini, "The Last Official Audience of Pius XI: Neville Chamberlain at the Vatican," in *Civiltà Cattolica*, March 20,

1979, pp. 5–26 ff.

January 2. Chamberlain's arrival. The visit was essentially kept low-key, since neither the Duce nor I were particularly convinced of its usefulness. The crowd's reception was warm, especially in the central districts and middle-class neighborhoods, where the old man with the umbrella is very popular. It was cooler in the outlying areas, where the workers seemed less moved. Chamberlain, however, was very pleased with the reception. Perhaps he still remembers the boos that greeted him two months ago in friendly France... The conversation took place in a weary tone. The matters discussed were not the most important ones, and one could easily sense the mental reservations on both sides. Today's conversation was more of a feeler: actual contact has not yet been established. But how far removed we are from these people! Another world...

January 12. The afternoon meeting… was marked by the deep sense of concern that prevails among the British regarding Germany… The British do not want to fight. They are trying to retreat as slowly as possible, but they do not want to fight. Mussolini defended Germany with great loyalty, and was somewhat cryptic about his own and the Führer's future plans. The talks with the British are over: nothing was accomplished.

I phoned Ribbentrop to tell him that the visit had been a "big letdown," completely harmless...

In Italy, outside the circle of "insiders" and those who were somewhat more informed about "high politics" or followed the foreign press, few had sensed the failure of the Rome meetings. Most people, eager only for peace and not wanting to see ties with Germany grow even closer, had viewed the meetings positively—as a reassuring development that, all things considered, constituted a prestigious success for Italy and a confirmation of the soundness of Mussolini's policies; a development that also gave cause for hope regarding relations with France. Typical is this entry from L. Gasparotto's diary under the dates January 11–February 15, 1939:

Fortune continues to favor the "Duce's" boldness, and a halo of glory is about to encircle his brow. Today, our friend Chamberlain, with his umbrella, is in Rome, having arrived from London. A toast. Mussolini drinks "to the great friendly nation"—which is England—and to the new reality in the Mediterranean and Africa established by the friendship between the two countries.

The English guest responds by raising his glass to His Majesty the King of Italy, Emperor of Ethiopia! Peace and joy, then. "Perfidious Albion" recognizes and legitimizes Italy's African conquest. Everything is going according to plan. At this moment, there is also a courtship with Poland, "strong in the courage and tenacity of its sons, just like 'Fascist' Italy." So says Mussolini's message to the *Gazeta Polska* of February 15.

Abroad, however, the substantial failure of the Rome meetings had come as little surprise. Even though no one was aware of Mussolini's decision to transform the Axis into a full-fledged alliance, the "Duce's" policy in recent months left little room for hope. Many—not only in England, as Grandi had told Ciano—considered it practically a foregone conclusion. Even those who still hoped for a strengthening of Italian-British friendship, in reality, hardly knew how to justify their hopes anymore and often ended up resorting to rather generic and trite arguments. A case in point is Lord Elton, who, in the January 8 issue of the *Sunday Chronicle*, resorted to a contradictory and abstruse psychological argument centered on the profound difference in the characters of Chamberlain and

Mussolini—a difference that, however, might ultimately prove to be “a blessing,” given that the two men shared a bond with their respective peoples—Chamberlain descended from merchants, Mussolini from farmers—and their intellectual and spiritual capacities could lead them to “harmonize” with one another, “because one is, after all, the complement of the other.”

The various portrayals that had made Mussolini a favorite in many circles—and that had been widely featured in books, magazines, and newspapers across many countries—ranging from the oldest, typical of the Anglo-Saxon world, of the “necessary evil for the good of Italy,” to that of the “difficult” statesman who was “self-interested and selfish in an Italian way” yet a realist—had long since lost their appeal. While the more or less colorful—and, all things considered, favorable—“pieces” about his life, his daily routine, and his love affairs continued to be published frequently—especially by high-circulation Anglo-Saxon newspapers, and had seen a brief surge immediately after Munich—alongside them, even in non-leftist and “respectable” newspapers, critical and decidedly negative ones. On the scale of pros and cons, the cons were increasingly carrying more weight. A few years earlier, statements like this had been rare; now, however, they were becoming more and more frequent—and, moreover, without any qualms 285:

It is a joke to keep repeating that he saved Italy from Bolshevism, because the Fascist Italy of 1934 is closer to Bolshevism than the parliamentary Italy of 1920... Not only because fascism and Bolshevism are the two similar terms of an equation, but because the fascist regime, by destroying freedom, has shattered the vigor of the Italian conscience and prepared Italy for all forms of submission and servitude in the future.

In reality, a man resembles his own portraits: he is a prisoner of the image he has created of himself. When the picture is shattered and the optical illusion has vanished, what will remain? A bold and courageous agitator who was willing to pay the price personally, rally a band of followers, and lead them to victory—a high-ranking police prefect who transformed his town into a surveillance post and a courtroom corridor—a highly skilled director who, from his past as a journalist, retained a sense of publicity and a flair for catchphrases. And politics?...

First Ethiopia, then Spain, and finally the Anschluss had all been stages in the decline of Mussolini’s popularity abroad. Books such as those by Gaudens Megaro (*Mussolini in the Making*) and G. A. Borgese (*Goliaih*) had contributed to this, but perhaps even more so had initiatives such as Orson Welles’s modern adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, in which Caesar was portrayed exactly as Mussolini, complete with black shirts and fascist salutes 286. The decisive blow, however, had been dealt by the rise, alongside the “minor dictator,” of the “major dictator,” Hitler, by the policies of the Axis, and by Mussolini’s “about-face” on the issue of anti-Semitism. Articles such as those already mentioned by Emil Ludwig—reprinted in nearly every country—in which the famous journalist, rightly or wrongly considered an admirer of Mussolini, now attacked and condemned him in no uncertain terms, dealt devastating blows to a certain image of the “Duce.” “That men of such temperament hold power
today is a misfortune not only for the countries they govern but also for the world” 287. “Regardless of political pacts, there can be no peace for the world nor hope for the progress of civilization as long as they persist in their policy of pernicious and subversive propaganda” 288. Alongside these increasingly critical assessments, reports had become frequent regarding Mussolini’s poor health, his “schizophrenia” and “paranoia” 289, the Italians’ discontent with him, the regime’s economic and financial difficulties, and even the possibility that it might collapse at any moment. As early as July 1938, drawing inspiration from Eugene J. Young’s book, *Looking Behind the Censorship*, the *Sunday Dispatch* ran a four-column headline claiming that, in reality, Mussolini no longer held much

sway in Italy. Contrary to what most people believed, Victor Emmanuel III wielded “downright surprising” power; the monarchy and the Vatican, while keeping a low profile, were consolidating their power day by day 290. Indeed, even during the Munich days, there had been newspapers—such as the *Daily Express*, in an article by K. V. Gordon—that had prophesied that the moment was not far off when the “monarchist party,” led by the Prince of Piedmont, would seize power, so that it was to be expected that the Czechoslovak crisis would soon be followed by an Italian one.[291] But perhaps most significant is that even those who still considered him a “narrow-minded” man—who, unlike the “mystic” Hitler, the truth “on a mountaintop and among the clouds of the Alps,” and—like Chamberlain and Daladier—a “realist,” and who therefore still seemed to place a modicum of trust in him, made no secret of the fact that “today Hitler is the master, Mussolini the disciple” 292. And that even the “propaganda of the regime,” which had so heavily influenced judgments on fascism and Mussolini in previous years, was now beginning to have less and less effect and, above all, no longer allowed other aspects of the reality of fascism to be overlooked—first and foremost, the threat to peace posed by Mussolini’s foreign policy. Thus, a few months later, in a review of the English translation of Giorgio Pini’s *Life of Mussolini*, the London-based *Spectator* would write:[293]

287 F. Bardon, “Dictators with a Grudge,” in *The Evening Dispatch*, January 7, 1938. The author of the article attributed the “well-known lack of sympathy the Duce had for the British” to the fact that, according to him, as a boy Mussolini had received “a good dose of punches” from an English boy his own age who was vacationing in Romagna.

Toward the end of the book, Mussolini is compared to Napoleon, Stalin, and Julius Caesar—to their detriment. “The Duce,” writes Mr. Pini, “unlike Napoleon, is not an unprincipled adventurer and does not infringe upon the genuine rights of individuals and nations.” After Abyssinia, Spain, and Albania, this is reassuring. Mr. Pini would have done better to devote more space to the common people’s view of Mussolini. Mussolini is a peasant, the son of a blacksmith, and the people do not forget this. I have spoken with peasants who, after criticizing the Duce, said, “But he’s one of us.” This is a fact that the opponents of fascism all too often overlook. Italians will not soon forget the long period during which they were ruled by foreigners and aristocrats. But Mussolini’s biography is not yet “the history of the Italian nation,” as Mr. Pini would have us believe, and one must wonder why most fascist propagandists feel it necessary to attribute to the Duce’s personal benevolence such things as sanatoriums for tuberculosis patients and workers’ housing—which were not unknown in Italy in 1921 and can even be found in well-established democracies.

But let us return to relations with Germany. When handing Attolico the letter for von Ribbentrop dated January 2, Ciano had instructed the ambassador to urge, upon delivery, a swift and satisfactory conclusion for Italy to the trade negotiations initiated the previous month and to also point out the advisability of “proceeding with Hitler’s plan to withdraw the Germans who wish to leave” from South Tyrol 294. As can be seen, once the alliance had been decided, Mussolini had also come to accept his son-in-law’s viewpoint in favor of resolving the South Tyrol issue according to Göring’s suggestion, and had hoped to derive some immediate practical benefit from his decision that might help alleviate the difficulties of the Italian economy and secure for it a portion of the raw materials necessary for its autarkic policies. In reality, however, to Mussolini’s great disappointment, everything immediately proved to be much more difficult than anticipated or hoped for. Regarding the alliance—which Ciano, in his letter, had proposed signing in the last ten days of the month—difficulties with the Japanese arose immediately 295. As Toscano has accurately reconstructed 296, the fall of the Konoye government (on January 4), some amendments to the draft three-way alliance (prepared primarily by the Japanese) proposed by the Italian side with the clear intention of making the alliance itself more all-encompassing

and less open to interpretation as essentially anti-Soviet; and, perhaps, Anglo-American pressure had in fact made Tokyo less interested in it or, at least, more careful about clarifying its various aspects. Hence the need to postpone its signing. Things had not gone very satisfactorily with the trade agreement either. Signed on February 13, it amounted to nothing more than a compromise between opposing demands, in which the German concessions ultimately turned out to be less than Rome had expected, and its implementation would prove even worse. Consider that the Germans, who were supposed to supply approximately 900,000 metric tons of coal per month, would in fact have supplied only about 3,160,000 metric tons over six months—nearly one million less than during the corresponding period of the previous year 297. Finally, regarding the question of South Tyrol, von Ribbentrop's response, while positive in principle, had in practice been evasive and dilatory.

"The agreement, in principle, is out of the question," Attolico reported to Rome on January 5, 298. "But von Ribbentrop believes that the matter requires a long and patient process. It would be impossible and dangerous to improvise. Wouldn't it be worse for us as well if—by holding out the mirage of repatriation—it could not then be realized in practice? A concrete plan had to be drawn up, regions selected, and preparations made to receive the new arrivals, etc., etc.

Faced with this response, Ciano—who did not want to give the impression of seeking to make the alliance contingent on the various pending issues between Rome and Berlin—had, for the time being, shown that he accepted the German point of view and had given instructions for the matter to be "settled quietly, without unnecessary and excessive publicity. "It is enough that the Germans, who are currently in need of manpower, take those foreigners who do not wish to remain in Italian territory south of the Alpine range" 299. This had given von Ribbentrop the opportunity to further dilute the implementation of the commitment made, to the point that, in a conversation with Attolico, he had hinted at the possibility that it might take decades to carry out the repatriation 3W.

It was at this point that Daladier's feeler, conveyed through Baudouin, had been sent. The "Duce," as mentioned, had considered it "interesting" and had authorized Ciano to pursue it. As we have also noted, it is difficult to believe, however, that even if it had actually gone ahead, it could have truly changed his policy at that point. This is proven, of course, not so much by the intransigence with which Mussolini had warned the British that he would react with force if the French attempted to come to the aid of the last pocket of "Red" resistance in Spain ("if the French intervene in force on behalf of the Reds in Barcelona, we will attack Valencia. Thirty battalions in combat readiness are ready to be shipped out at the first alarm. We will act in this way even if it were to lead to a European war"[301]), given that this statement was made on January 16—and thus prior to Baudouin's démarche—but rather by his irritation at the slow pace of the negotiations for the alliance with Germany. An irritation that would be inexplicable if he had believed that an agreement on the terms proposed by Baudouin would have placed Italian-French relations on a truly new footing and that on February 8 (after both Ciano's meeting with Baudouin and the fall of Barcelona on January 26—which, by effectively marking the end of the Spanish Civil War, must have reassured him about the risk of having to face a conflict with France), he was prompted to tell Ciano that, given the delays imposed by Tokyo, it would be better to conclude a bilateral alliance, without the Japanese, especially since such a solution "would be sufficient on its own to counter the Anglo-French alliance and would have no anti-British or anti-American overtones" 302. And he returned to this idea on March 3.

The Duce—as Ciano noted that day 303—is increasingly in favor of a bilateral alliance with Berlin, leaving Tokyo out. Japan, as our ally, will definitively push the United States into the arms of the Western democracies. He wants to accelerate the Italian-German alliance.

To understand Mussolini's haste, it is necessary to take into account a variety of factors. In ascending order of importance, they were as follows. First, the repeated leaks (which certainly occurred in Tokyo, but almost certainly also in Berlin and Rome 304) regarding the Italian-German-Japanese negotiations had alarmed all the foreign ministries involved and had been the subject of revelations very close to the truth by various newspapers, particularly the *News Chronicle* of November 28, January 17, and February 10, which advised him to expedite the alliance with Germany, since it was no longer possible to continue denying them as Ciano had been doing 305. Second, pressure from military leaders who, as mentioned, feared a French preemptive strike and, given how far things had progressed, wanted to deter it by giving the Axis a clear military framework and were calling for the start of military talks with the Germans—to which, at first, it seems Mussolini, while stating he was in principle in favor, had opposed ("Yes! But wait!" he reportedly replied 306), limiting himself in the meantime to ordering the dispatch of reinforcements to Libya 307, and to which, however, by the end of the first week of March, he gave the go-ahead 308. Third, the sudden, unexpected removal of Stojadinović from the leadership of the Yugoslav government on February 4. Although partly driven by domestic political considerations (the Croatian question), this event constituted for Italy—regardless of what the

304 On these leaks, the hypotheses surrounding them, and their international repercussions, see M. Toscano, *The Diplomatic Origins of the Pact of Steel*, op. cit., Chapter I, passim. One might wonder whether the ease and carelessness with which Ciano often spoke—during receptions, dinners, and social gatherings—about the most secret matters of state might also have played a role in these leaks. See E. Ciano, *La mia testimonianza*, op. cit., pp. 96 ff.

Regent Prince Paolo, the chief architect of Stojadinović's ouster, to the Italian representative in Belgrade—a serious setback, both because it signaled Yugoslavia's desire to distance itself in some way from the Axis, particularly from Italy, and to move closer to the Anglo--French alliance; second, because the example set by Belgrade could influence the stance of other countries in Southeast Europe that Mussolini instead wished to draw into the Axis orbit—first and foremost Romania; and third, because, as we shall soon see, it created a partially new situation regarding Mussolini's and Ciano's plans for Albania. Nor should it be underestimated that, given the deep concerns about German dynamism and ruthlessness and Berlin's lack of precise commitments regarding mutual spheres of influence in Central Europe and the Balkans, in Rome—as Breccia 309 rightly noted—"there was suspicion that the Germans were somehow implicated in Stojadinović's downfall," and Ciano believed it was "a maneuver orchestrated by Germany to block the growth of Italy's influence in Croatia." Fourth, and finally, the determination of Mussolini—and even more so of Ciano—to carry out their plans for the conquest of Albania, of which they had not informed the Germans, but for the realization of which both—and particularly the former—felt it necessary to first conclude the alliance with Berlin, both to avoid possible reactions or countermeasures by the Germans—who, despite Ciano's démarche in May '38, continued to interfere in Albania[310]—and, above all, to discourage any Anglo-French and, perhaps, Yugoslav reactions.

Having obtained, as we have seen, Mussolini's consent in May 1938, Ciano—as has also already been mentioned—immediately set to work preparing the Albanian operation, with May 1939 as the tentative deadline. The Czechoslovak crisis had caused the operation to stall somewhat. Immediately after Munich, however, preparations resumed at full speed, sparing no expense and even planning, to facilitate the operation, the assassination of King Zog. Ciano's diary is explicit on this point; under the date of October 27, 1938, it reads311:

310 From a communication from von Mackensen to the Wilhelmstrasse dated February 10, 1939 (DGFP, s. D, IV, pp. 578 ff.) it appears that even on that occasion, Ciano—concerned about German

“claims” to Albanian oil—had to reiterate in a “very serious” tone to the German ambassador that, for Italy, Albania was “like one of its own provinces” and that “everything concerning Albania is an Italian family affair.”

Preparations in Albania are proceeding rapidly—so rapidly, in fact, that it might be advisable to speed things up, as some alarm may have been raised in the King’s inner circle. The plan is beginning to take clear shape: the assassination of the King (it appears Koçi has been tasked with this in exchange for ten million), street demonstrations, the deployment of gangs loyal to us (practically all the leaders, except for the one in Kmia), an appeal to Italy for political and, if necessary, military intervention, the offer of the crown to the King-Emperor, and, in a second phase, annexation.

On November 14, Mussolini, “who had long been reserved on the matter of Albania,” had urged Ciano “to act,” “always keeping our spring deadline firmly in mind”; on the 30th he had then spoken of it in the Grand Council, though without committing to a date, and on December 6 he had reviewed and approved the action plan prepared by his son-in-law, raising an objection—according to Ciano’s diary—only to the part concerning preparations regarding Yugoslavia, in order to prevent the operation from undermining that country’s friendship toward Italy “to Germany’s advantage”3I2. We do not know whether on this occasion Ciano had also informed his father-in-law of the part of the plan that called for the assassination of the king; in fact, it seems he was very much afraid that the “Duce” would not approve of it3'3. The real crux of much of the operation, however, was Yugoslavia’s stance. During the meeting Ciano had with Stojadinovic in Venice on June 18, 1938, the Yugoslav Prime Minister had told him that “the Albanian problem was a major issue when relations with Italy were strained,” but that, given the new “fortunate” state of relations between the two countries, he did not attach “any particular importance to the Albanian question” and recognized Italy’s “absolutely exceptional position with regard to that state”314. However, there was a world of difference between this and accepting an occupation without batting an eye, and on January 15—three days before Ciano left for another meeting with Stojadinović—it was no coincidence that both he and Mussolini had agreed[315] that it was not worth risking Belgrade’s precious friendship over Albania. Therefore, as things stand, we will act only if we can reach an agreement that should be based on the following: the adjustment of the Yugoslav border, the demilitarization of the Albanian border, a military alliance, and support for the Serbs’ conquest of Thessaloniki.

Stojadinović, for his part, while stating that he was not prepared to discuss the matter in depth—and that any negotiations on the subject were best conducted not through normal diplomatic channels, but through trusted agents, and that it would be advisable for Ciano to mention this to the regent as well, did not react negatively to the Italian foreign minister’s probe and did not at all “rule out the possibility of proceeding with the partition of Albania between Italy and Yugoslavia, as had been suggested in the past.”316 However, Stojadinovic’s fall, fifteen days later, made this probe extremely dangerous. Hence, according to Ciano, the need to rush the operation without worrying, at this point, about Yugoslav reactions (“With Stojadinovic, a division between us and Yugoslavia. Without Stojadinovic, our occupation without Yugoslavia and, if necessary, against Yugoslavia”)—all the more so since preparations on the ground were now complete, the local leaders bribed by the Italians were insisting that it take place as soon as possible, and, should there be any delay in taking action, there was a risk that they would lose confidence or act on their own, or that King Zog might end up being informed of it.[317] Initially, on February 5–6, Mussolini had agreed with this approach; he had also accepted, in principle, the date proposed by Ciano—Easter week—and the possibility of informing the Germans in advance had not been ruled out.[318] A week or so, however, had been enough for Mussolini to change his mind. While he had initially agreed that the new Yugoslav government should not be given time “to strengthen its political, diplomatic, and military ties with France and England,” the “Duce”—more

cautious than Ciano—soon became convinced that, before taking action, it would be better to wait for "the resolution of the Spanish affair and the conclusion of the alliance with Germany."[319] Pending these two events—which, moreover, were predictably not far off—the operation had been shelved for the time being.

On March 10, the British government solemnly declared that the situation in Europe could be considered stable. That same day, two communications arrived in Rome from Berlin that suggested

Meanwhile, on February 10, Ciano—having learned that the Germans were continuing to attempt to "get their hands on Albanian oil"—had once again warned the German ambassador that "any German intervention would create strong resentment among the Italian public" (ibid., p. 251).

Mussolini and Ciano were assured that everything was proceeding, despite the delays we have mentioned, in the desired direction. The first, from Attolico, confirmed the Führer's willingness to "march" alongside Italy; in the second, von Ribbentrop informed Ciano that he had accepted the Italian proposal to immediately initiate contacts between the two general staffs. Both pieces of news were received with great satisfaction. Regarding the second message, Ciano noted in his diary, entry 320:

We accept and suggest Innsbruck as the venue for the meeting, to be held as soon as possible and with due publicity. It is advisable to let the world know that the Axis is also preparing and does not intend to leave the initiative to the Franco-British, as seems to have been the case for some time.

Nothing in the two communications foreshadowed that on that very same day, the mechanism was being set in motion that, five days later, would bring about the end of Czechoslovak independence. In the wake of the "Slovak unrest"—triggered by the dismissal of Monsignor Tiso's Slovak government, decided on March 10 by Czechoslovak President Hacha, and by Monsignor Tiso's appeal for help to Hitler three days later—German troops entered Bohemia and Moravia on March 15 and occupied Prague. From there, Hitler issued a proclamation declaring Bohemia and Moravia—which he described as lands that had been part of the Reich's "living space" for millennia—a German protectorate. On the same day, Slovakia proclaimed its independence and placed itself under German protection, while Hungarian troops invaded Subcarpathian Ruthenia. A week later, Memel, too, was "reunited" with the Reich.

This series of events struck Rome like a hailstorm of blows as unexpected as they were dramatic. At first, Mussolini—even more so than Ciano—had not attached any importance to the Slovak crisis.[32] That, less than six months after Munich, and without even informing him—the very "architect" of the Munich Agreement—Hitler would so sensationally and brutally tear up the agreements, the ink on which was still wet, must have seemed impossible to him. Then, once he realized the gravity of the situation, anxiety, fear, despondency, irritation, and a desire for revenge set in—a desire to take advantage of the moment to secure some gain and thus save the regime's "honor." Mario Luciolli, then a young official in the Coordination Office of Ciano's cabinet—the inner sanctum of foreign policy in those years—has left us a vivid description of the impact of the Czechoslovak events at Palazzo Chigi and Palazzo Venezia[322]:

For many days after the crisis, the official circles in Rome were so dejected that one might have thought those in Prague could hardly be more so. The subjugation of Czechoslovakia had aroused indescribable indignation in Italy. On Mussolini's desk, reports were piling up from the police, the Carabinieri, the political offices of the Militia, and the federal secretaries, all of which consistently reported on the anti-German sentiments of the Italian people, regardless of region or social class.

Telegrams from embassies and legations echoed the disgust aroused throughout the world by Germany's cowardly action. Mussolini, in the presence of everyone who approached him, gave free rein to scathing remarks directed at Germany. Ciano declared in a theatrical tone to one of his aides that "the day of [illegible date] March had been sadder for Italy than the day of Campoformio."

For the purposes of our discussion, once again the most valuable and eloquent source is Ciano's diary[323]:

March 14 . The news from Central Europe is growing more serious. For the first time, Ribbentrop has spoken with Attolico and has made it clear that the German plan is far-reaching: to incorporate Bohemia, make Slovakia a vassal state, and cede Ruthenia to the Hungarians. It is not yet possible to say how and when this will be carried out, but such an event is bound to make the most sinister impression on the Italian people. The Axis is working solely in favor of one of the parties, which is gaining too much dominance and acting on its own initiative with very little regard for us. I express this point of view to the Duce. He remains reserved and does not yet seem to attach much importance to the event. He seeks compensation in the advantages Hungary will gain by establishing a common border with the Poles and instructs me to tell Budapest to proceed decisively. But to me, that seems insufficient...

March 15 . During the night, events come to a head. Following a meeting between Hitler, Hacha, and Chwalkosky, German troops begin the occupation of Bohemia. The situation is grave, all the more so because Hitler had assured us that he would never wish to annex a single Czech. The German action is no longer destroying the Czechoslovakia of Versailles, but rather the one that had been built in Munich and Vienna. What weight can we give in the future to those other declarations and promises that concern us more directly? It is pointless to deny that all this worries and humiliates the Italian people. We must give them satisfaction and compensation: Albania. I speak of this to the Duce, to whom I also express my conviction that today we would encounter neither obstacles nor serious international complications to hinder our advance. He authorizes me to telegraph Jacomoni to prepare local troop movements and personally orders the Navy to keep the second squadron on standby in Taranto. I immediately consult with Cavagnari, and after sending the telegraphic instructions to Tirana, I am able to speak by telephone with Jacomoni, who was en route to headquarters. He says that tomorrow he will telegraph

what he believes can be done and also raises the possibility of issuing an ultimatum to the King: either he accepts the landing of Italian troops and requests a protectorate, or the troops will land against him. I consult with the Duce again. He seems a bit less resolute about the Albanian operation.

Meanwhile, Assia arrives with the usual message. This time it's verbal and highly unsatisfactory. The Führer has us say that he acted because the Czechs were not demobilizing their forces along the borders, because they continued to maintain contact with Russia, and because they mistreated the Germans. These pretexts may be good for Goebbels's propaganda, but they should be spared when speaking to us, who have been guilty of being too loyal to them. Assia, in conveying the Führer's thanks for Italy's commendable support, says that with this operation, twenty divisions are now free to be deployed in another area in support of Axis policy. But Hitler warns Mussolini that if he intends to undertake a large-scale operation, it would be better to wait a couple of years until there are a hundred divisions available. They could have spared us that addition. The Duce reacts by asserting that in the event of war with France, we will fight on our own, without asking Germany for a single man, and will be quite content if it can supply us with weapons and equipment.

I return to the Duce after Assia has taken his leave. I find him dissatisfied with the message and in low spirits. He does not want to release the news of Assia's visit to the press ("the Italians would laugh at me—every time Hitler takes over a country, he sends me a message"). He speaks again of Albania but has not yet made up his mind. Some doubts, which he has not yet revealed to me, are tormenting his mind. He is calm, as always in serious matters, but he does not, at least for now, display the reaction I expected to see in him. He wants me to return this evening...

I see the Duce again in the late afternoon. He is aware of the hostile reaction of the Italian people, but asserts that it is now best to put on a brave face in the face of German pressure and thus avoid making ourselves "unpleasing to God and a target for our enemies." He again hints at the possibility of a strike in Albania, but he remains hesitant. Even the occupation of Albania, in his view, could not counterbalance—in the eyes of world public opinion—the incorporation into the Reich of one of the world's richest territories, such as Bohemia. I am becoming convinced that nothing will come of it. All the more so since, when Admiral Cavagnari was received before me, the Duce limited himself to asking general questions about the possibility of carrying out a landing, but gave no instructions whatsoever. What a pity! In my view, the offensive in Albania would have boosted the nation's morale; it would have been a tangible achievement of the Axis, and once achieved, we could have reevaluated our policy —including toward Germany, whose hegemony is beginning to take shape in a very troubling manner.

March 16 . Mussolini summoned me to Villa Torlonia at 9 a.m. He looked tired. He said he had thought long and hard during the night and had come to the conclusion to postpone the Albanian operation, above all because he fears that, by shaking up the Yugoslav structure, it might favor Croatian independence under German auspices. This would mean the Prussians in Sussak: it is not worth taking this risk to seize Albania, which we can take at any other time. I see that Mussolini does not intend to proceed with the matter: there is no point in insisting. I order Jacomoni to halt everything. I keep a note drafted by the Duce, in which he lists the reasons for the postponement. I have another conversation with the Duce. He believes that Prussian hegemony in Europe is now a fait accompli. He is of the opinion that a coalition of all the other powers, including us, could curb German expansion, but no longer push it back. He does not place much stock in the military aid that might be provided

by the smaller powers. I ask whether, under these circumstances, it is in our interest to enter into the alliance or rather to maintain full freedom to act in the future according to our own interests. The Duce declares himself clearly in favor of the alliance. I express my reservations, because the alliance will be very unpopular in Italy and also because I fear that Germany might use it to further advance its expansionist policy in Central Europe...

March 17 . Public opinion around the world is gloomy. Dismayed telegrams are arriving from all the capitals... I meet with some diplomats: the Belgian Ambassador and the American Ambassador. They express their concerns about the future and their indignation toward Berlin. I confess that it is not easy for me to find words to justify Germany's actions. I imply that we were in agreement or, at the very least, informed; but it is so unpleasant to lie!

The Duce is deep in thought and depressed. It is the first time I have seen him like this. Even during the Anschluss, he maintained a greater sense of detachment. He is worried about the Croatian issue: he fears that Macek will proclaim independence and place himself under German protection: "In that case," he says, "there are no alternatives—except these: either fire the first shot at Germany or be swept away by a revolution led by the fascists themselves; no one would tolerate seeing the swastika in the Adriatic." He also considers the possibility of calling a temporary halt to the deployment of troops to Libya by reaching an agreement with France through London, but then abandons the idea. On my

advice, he decided to approach the Germans regarding the Croatian issue: to state clearly and unequivocally that any alteration of the Yugoslav status quo in Croatia could not be accepted by us without a complete and fundamental reevaluation of our policy.

I called Mackensen and spoke with him—very calmly but just as decisively. I recalled that the Führer had told the Duce and me that the Germans had no interest in the Mediterranean: it was on this premise that we had formulated the Axis policy. If such a premise were to fail, the Axis would break apart, and German intervention in the Croatian question would automatically undermine this premise...

As can be seen, the Nazi attack on Czechoslovakia had a traumatic effect on Mussolini and, apparently even more so, on Ciano, forcing both to rethink their entire policy for a moment, to the point of considering the possibility of abandoning the idea of an alliance with Germany and of moving closer to England and France. On March 19, Ciano would go so far as to note in entry 524:

The events of recent days have completely overturned my opinion of the Führer and Germany: he, too, is disloyal and treacherous, and no policy can be pursued with him. Starting today, I will work with the Duce to secure an agreement with the Western Powers as well. But will there be a modicum of common sense in Paris, or will the possibility of an understanding be compromised once again, as they retreat into their usual stinginess?

Despite his good intentions, however, Ciano was still too under the thumb of his father-in-law to be able to decide to act differently—and practically in opposition to him—and, moreover, preventing him from doing so were his obsession with the occupation of Albania (and the associated "duchy") and his inability—even at that moment—to refrain from being cunning, from seeking to exploit what should have been a fundamental overhaul of Italian policy, made necessary by the now-established awareness of Hitler's unquenchable thirst for hegemony and the threat it posed to everyone, including Italy. The reference to French "stinginess" speaks volumes. Thus, once he had gotten over the initial shock, he would quickly return to his former comfortable routine and adapt without too much difficulty to the "Duce's" decisions.

Romanian Foreign Minister Gregor Gafencu, who met with him during the first two days of May, grasped his attitude perfectly. According to him, in fact, Ciano—"who didn't believe in much"—had only a faint confidence in Axis policy at that time. At worst, he would have accepted it as a means of blackmail, but he sensed the dangers that military collaboration might entail: there was undeniably, in Ciano's disillusioned nature, a shrewder side that warned him against the verbal excesses of his German comrades and against the brutality of their actions. He lacked the qualities to oppose official policy; but he could point out its dangers with words that struck a chord. His docility kept him in power; his skepticism strengthened his position.

For Mussolini, however, the choice must have been more real, difficult, dramatic, and entirely his own; the complete isolation in which he found himself—and in which he wished to remain—Ciano's character—as the only person truly close to him—and the nature of the relationship that had developed between them made any influence, even a purely rhetorical one, over him impossible. As PastorelliV6 has once again rightly pointed out, his reactions to Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia "mark the moment of realization of the error":

The lack of information was repeated, as it had been with the Anschluss, but the matter now took on greater significance, both because the alliance had by then been approved and because Mussolini had played a decisive role in the Munich Agreement. Distrust of German promises and assurances thus

began to creep in: this is particularly evident in his concerns over the Croatian question and the postponement of the expedition to Albania.

The “Duce” had always feared Germany. If he had chosen to befriend it, it was out of fear of being isolated from everyone else and out of a desire to use the strength of the Axis to gain some advantage that would strengthen his position, allow him to swing the pendulum back in his favor, and carry out his plans—before a new “Four-Power Pact”— and then what we have termed the “tri-axis system,” upon which the European balance of power was to be based for some time yet, and, if possible, an agreed-upon and to some extent shared utilization of African resources. Ideological motives had carried some weight, but were not decisive; it cannot be ruled out that at times they served primarily as a means of self-justification—both with regard to his friendship with Nazi Germany and in leading him to view as provisional the agreement he simultaneously sought to establish with England, as well as the “moderation” of his demands on France at that time. The decision to transform the Axis into a full-fledged alliance had cost him dearly and had been, for him, a choice essentially imposed by the situation in which he had placed himself after Munich. Now everything confirmed his long-standing fears regarding Germany and demonstrated that the alliance would serve neither to rein in Hitler nor to make relations between Rome and Berlin clear and secure. The events of mid-March had, however—again from his perspective—introduced something “positive” into the European reality. By destroying what remained—if it had ever truly existed—of the “spirit of Munich,” they had brought Anglo-French-German relations back to such a level of tension that a possible rapprochement between Italy and London, and even Paris, could not only be “justified,” but it would not have carried the connotation of a “pilgrimage to Canossa” that it would have had prior to those events; for, had Canossa been mentioned, France too would have gone to Canossa following Daladier’s extremely intransigent public statements—and, moreover, France would have borne the actual costs, albeit to a minimal extent. In fact, during the days when Mussolini was grappling with these issues, Daladier’s overture via Baudouin seemed poised to move forward, and we know today that even after the French Prime Minister had temporarily blocked it precisely as a result of the events in Czechoslovakia, Bonnet was willing to revive it—so much so that by the end of April he would have tasked Gafencu with sounding out Rome in this regard. But Mussolini would not have learned of this until after he had made his decisions 327. In addition to all this, Mussolini was well aware of another matter—and not in the crude and simplistic way of Ciano, who, as we have seen, thought (or perhaps merely told his father-in-law to persuade him to give him the green light for “his” venture) that the occupation of Albania could constitute for the Italians “a source of satisfaction and compensation” for the shock of Prague: in the aftermath of Czechoslovakia’s dissolution, the Italians would not have accepted an alliance with Berlin. “The stones would rise up,” he told Ciano on March 19. 328.

It is clear that, especially for a man like Mussolini, this was not an easy decision. And Ciano’s diary—which, at least until the beginning of the last ten days of March, is so full of entries about the “Duce’s” depression, bad mood, and inner turmoil—proves this abundantly. The “stages” of his decision can be outlined as follows. In the late afternoon of March 15, as we have already seen, Mussolini told Ciano that “by now it is best to put on a brave face regarding the German move and thus avoid making ourselves ‘displeasing to God and a target for our enemies.’” The next day, in the second of three conversations he had with his son-in-law, he declared—as we have also seen—that he was “unequivocally in favor of the alliance.” And Ciano found him still “leaning in favor of the Axis” the following day as well. Moreover, on that very same March 18, the *Giornale d’Italia* published an article—anonymous but entirely written by Mussolini—that placed the blame for what had happened squarely on the shoulders of the Prague government (“Over the course of six months, there has been no gesture demonstrating a radical change of course, neither in domestic nor in foreign policy. In domestic policy, the Prague government had failed to free itself from the grim legacy of Beneš’s “system”; in

foreign policy, aside from a few rather half-hearted hints, nothing had been changed: Prague had even remained in the League of Nations. It is unlikely that Prague's leaders could have deluded themselves into thinking they still served as Russia's 'aircraft carrier,' yet they had not entirely broken free from this mad past. Indeed, wavering was observed among Prague's decision-makers when it was believed that the "great democracies" had regained the political and diplomatic initiative in the Danube basin," and on this basis he justifies Germany's actions 330. On the 19th, Mussolini said that if he were to form the alliance at that moment, "all hell would break loose," but he made no mention whatsoever of not forming it in the future. On the morning of the 20th, Ciano found him "very anti-German" and full of mistrust toward the commitments that, as we shall see, Berlin claimed to be making to him; nevertheless, that evening he stated bluntly: "We cannot change our policy because we are not whores" 331. On the evening of the following day, March 21, in the Grand Council, he "spoke of the need to adopt a policy of uncompromising loyalty to the Axis" and approved Ciano's harsh rebuke of Balbo ("the democratic pig who was the orator of the

Loggia Girolamo Savonarola of Ferrara"), who had spoken of shoes "polished" for the Germans 332. We mentioned his speech in the Grand Council in the third chapter. Given its importance, however, it is worth examining it more closely. Ciano dismisses it in his diary with a few sentences; Bottai, fortunately, is less laconic in his 333:

The German Question, in the Grand Council. Mussolini has the confidential bulletin from *Cultura Popolare* on the foreign press read aloud, first by Alfieri and then by Buffarini. He follows the reading, emphasizing the passages with expressive gestures: irony, anger, boredom, disgust, and contempt flit across his face. This creates a predefined mood that will set the tone for the discussion—if there is to be one at all.

Then, after the agenda is read, he launches into his speech. He begins from the very beginning, with the Treaty of Versailles. "Clemenceau realized there were 20 million more Germans. What did he devise, then? To encircle Germany. He formed, around small, homogeneous ethnic nuclei, complex, heterogeneous ethnic groups: Czechoslovakia, in fact, Poland—with its more compact central core—Yugoslavia, which was also, let's not forget, directed against Italy, and so on." This contrivance could not last. "In 1921, I foresaw a Germany of 80 million." Demographic considerations: "Germany owes its strength to its relentless demographic growth, to the fertility of its women. Numbers are strength—I have said this many times. What are the Italians doing? Last year's recovery is already faltering. There is a decline in births."

"In 1933," he says, "I made an attempt to channel the German revival through the Four-Power Pact. How was this pact received by the French press? With this description: the 'club of the charcutiers'; the 'club des charcutiers.' It was France that demolished this means of channeling Germany."

"In 1935," he continued, "there was Stresa, where an attempt was made to rein in German dynamism. At Stresa, it was already clear that we were preparing for the Abyssinian campaign. When they showed me the communiqué, which spoke of 'world peace,' I said to Flandin: 'Let's say "European peace"; let's not make commitments that are too broad.'" And Flandin—that tall, apathetic Flandin—replied, 'I understand. You don't want to commit yourself because of Africa.' What happened next? Sanctions. Is there anyone willing to forget the sanctions? I am certainly not that person."

"And above all"—his voice grows loud and agitated here—"let's stop talking about 'morality' in politics when it comes to relations between peoples. I want to make a cynical statement: in international relations, there is only one morality—success. We were immoral when we attacked the

Negus. We won, and we became moral—very moral indeed."

"Germany was not satisfied with Munich. Himmler, I recall, said to me, showing me his saber: 'If everything must be settled diplomatically, I ask what use this is to us... " And besides, Czechoslovakia couldn't hold out. People invoke respect for the signatures on treaties. Signatures represent the crystallization of certain aspects of a situation. If that situation changes, the signatures become null and void on their own."

"What are we being asked today? To abandon our friends? To do a waltz? I blush at the thought that anyone could still imagine Italy capable of doing a waltz."

"The problem for us is another one. It is the balance of power within the 'Axis.' The demographic balance has shifted in favor of the Germans, who will, however, one day recognize the mistake of having included three million Czechs in their compact bloc. Militarily, the ratios are as follows: Germany has twice as many divisions; our navy is twice the size of Germany's; our air force outnumbers Germany's by a ratio of 5 to 1; and our industrial capacity is 12 times that of Germany's. Thus, the annexation of Czechoslovakia has altered the internal balance of power within the Axis in Germany's favor. But we have a political advantage: we are the arbiters of the situation in Europe. Unless we want it, Germany will not be surrounded. That is our guarantee. Under these circumstances, France will not go to war. We must follow the Axis's policy as a serious nation. No waltzing around."

"Naturally, when rumors began circulating about German intentions regarding Croatia, I called Mackensen and told him: 'Let your government know that Croatia falls within the sphere of our policy; the Adriatic is an Italian sea—and Italian alone.' Mackensen turned pale. I must say that the Führer responded in a thoroughly satisfactory manner. If the Croatian question arises, we will be the ones to resolve it."

"The Albanian problem is not urgent. It will come to a head when we want it to. We will tell those in charge that our relations must be adjusted differently; and everything will be taken care of."

"The Czechs have proven to be a cowardly people. They are the Jews of the Slavs. They are a people corroded by these three evils: Freemasonry, democracy, and Bolshevism."

"We have two opportunities to clarify our position: the speech to the Crown (this is the fourth time I've given it; I have experience with such compositions); and my speech to the squadristi on the 26th. I will state our demands to France. France will act as it sees fit."

"A united front of democracies? Nothing will come of it. The United States will provide cannons and cash."

"In short, we must enhance our standing vis-à-vis our Axis ally. When? Where? We'll see."

No explanation is given regarding the "surprise" of the German move. Was Italy warned in time? Even Galeazzo, who adds a few remarks to the Duce's statements, glosses over this issue. One gets the distinct impression that the Grand Council remains in this state of uncertainty, which is of essential importance. Is the question of "morality" rearing its head again? In the Duce's own words, the issue swings from one contradiction to another. In short, if success could be achieved by abandoning the Axis policy, would it be morally right to abandon the Axis?

As we have outlined them, the steps through which Mussolini reached his decision might seem so straightforward as to even cast doubt on his uncertainties, and his decision itself might appear unproblematic. In reality, it contained many significant problems, both for understanding the reasons behind this choice and for understanding subsequent ones. In fact, the “decision” made by Mussolini between March 15 and 21, 1939, contains the seeds of both the “non-belligerence” policy adopted a few months later and the subsequent idea of a “parallel war.”

What led Mussolini to continue down the path of the Axis and not to take advantage of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia to at least distance himself from it? This is all the more puzzling given that we know today (though Mussolini must have had some inkling of it as well) that London and Paris were expecting something along those lines from him. Various facts serve as eloquent indicators of this. The change of heart by François-Poncet—who for at least three months had been pessimistic about the prospects for relations with Italy—toward the idea, as of March 22, that a Franco-Italian rapprochement was possible, and his positive assessment of Mussolini’s March 26 speech, which he rightly judged to be a maneuver “to bring us to the negotiating table.” The reassuring and conciliatory telegrams sent by Perth—who was by then about to leave Rome—to the Foreign Office, urging them not to confuse German actions with Italian claims against France and not to completely alienate Mussolini by needlessly irritating him 335. Telegrams which—despite the now deeply entrenched view in London of Mussolini’s opportunism—must have had some effect if the British acted to moderate Paris’s stance 336 and, far more significantly, if the Foreign Office—in an effort to dissuade Yugoslavia from accepting German proposals to conclude an economic agreement similar to the one signed on March 23 by Bucharest with Berlin (which had entrusted the exploitation of Romanian oil fields to German-Romanian joint ventures)—also invoked the argument that Italian policy would soon undergo a change.” 7. To answer this question, one must consider motivations of both a domestic nature and, more specifically, those of international politics.

The most evident—one might even say obvious—are the former. For Mussolini, distancing himself from Germany would have meant proving his domestic critics and opponents right, giving new life to the Catholics, the bourgeoisie, and the sovereign, and allowing them to “raise their heads” again (on March 20, during a meeting with Ciano, the king showed himself to be “more anti-German than ever” and spoke of German “insolence” and “duplicity” in contrast to British “fairness”; and, in the presence of Mussolini, he went so far as to call the Germans “scoundrels and ragamuffins”3M), and to those Fascists who, like De Bono359, had by then come to hope—just to make him “see the light”— “a Caporetto-style defeat”—to all those who, in one way or another, opposed not only his foreign policy but also his domestic policy. This would have meant renouncing, in whole or in a significant part, the totalitarianization of the regime and, in the long run, the creation of the “new man.” And this at a time when he, on the contrary, was preparing to imbue the upcoming celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Fasci di combattimento with precisely the significance of a grand, solemn affirmation of his policy 34°.

The issue of international political motivations is more complex. These were, in fact, manifold and not always evident at first glance. Even if domestic political considerations had not existed, distancing himself from the Nazis was impossible for Mussolini for at least three reasons, which, on closer inspection, can all be traced back to his positions regarding Ciano or in the Grand Council, as we have recalled. First of all, there was his conviction that by then Germany and the Germans (whom, tellingly, he often referred to in those days as “the Prussians”) had firmly established their hegemony in Europe and that no forces were capable of wresting it from them. Italy itself—and here we come to the second reason—was too weak militarily and economically to truly oppose it, especially since, even if one could succeed in uniting all the small continental powers against Germany, the military aid one could

rely on from them would be insufficient for the task. This—and let us open a parenthesis here—did not mean that Mussolini did not consider the problem of trying to wrest these nations from German influence and keep them firmly within his sphere of influence, ready for this purpose to even renounce Italian interests in Dalmatia 341 and, at first, to oppose the occupation of Albania; nor did it mean that, within a logic clearly aimed at the political and military containment of Germany, he did not view favorably the establishment of territorial contiguity between Poland and Hungary and did not rule out —in the unfortunate event that Yugoslav unity were to collapse due to conflicts between Croats and Serbs fomented by the Germans—the creation of such contiguity between Italy and Hungary. Even a coalition of all the powers, including Italy, would not have been able to "push back" German hegemony, but only to put a brake on it. However, aside from the precariousness and onerous nature of such a solution, Mussolini—and here we come to the third reason—did not consider it possible. The passivity that had characterized the Anglo-French stance in the face of Czechoslovakia's dissolution had made a profound impression on him. At first, he had thought that this time England would react. Perhaps mindful of Grandi's speeches,

340 On the occasion of the twentieth-anniversary celebrations on March 23, 1919, Victor Emmanuel III, fearing some sort of coup d'état similar to the "First Marshalate," once again considered (and conducted surveys) the possibility of conferring a noble title on Mussolini or appointing him Chancellor of the Empire. Mussolini, however, refused, and this gave him cause for renewed irritation toward the sovereign. See G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 271 ff. and 273.

On March 19, he had told Ciano 342: "We must not forget that the British are Bible readers and that they combine commercial fanaticism with mystical fanaticism. The latter now prevails, and they are capable of taking action." But then he became convinced that London had simply absorbed the blow and that was all. So much so that when, on March 31, Chamberlain announced that "in the event of any action that endangers Polish independence and which the Polish government deems it in its vital interest to resist with its own national forces, His Majesty's Government considers itself bound to support Poland immediately by all means," Mussolini failed to grasp the decisive significance of that declaration. Grandi—whom Mussolini had decided in the second half of February, when the alliance with Germany was clearly taking shape, to recall from London (though he had not yet set a date), and who had been summoned back for consultations after the occupation of Prague—left us a highly significant account of this matter[343]:

Mussolini sent for me. He said to me, agitated, "What does this British move mean? Don't the British realize that by signing this guarantee pact, they are lighting the fuse of a European war for the Poles, and will no longer be able to stop it? That they are losing the initiative for peace in Europe? Is it possible that British policy is so blind as not to see this?" I replied to Mussolini: "The guarantee to Poland simply means that the Munich policy is over, that Great Britain considers itself to be in a potential state of war against Germany. We must not forget history. Direct, overt protection of British interests would not be sufficient for a British government to secure the consent of the British people for a war against Germany. A moral justification is needed. In 1914, England entered the war to defend its threatened interests; the moral justification was its duty of honor to defend invaded Belgium. This time, it is Poland." Mussolini looked at me in disbelief: "No. I don't believe it. 1) Germany will not go to war with Poland. 2) England will not enter the war to defend Poland. If anything, we'll have another Munich."

Furthermore, what made a grand coalition of all the powers unthinkable for Mussolini at that moment were the reports of Anglo-French attempts to form a "democratic bloc" against Germany.[344] Such an approach to containing Germany could obviously not be accepted by Mussolini, because it signaled a

desire to proceed without him and because, in any case, he could not have joined it. Finally, one must not underestimate the negative impression made on him by the letter Chamberlain wrote to him on March 20, expressing his earnest hope “that you will consider it possible, through whatever channels may be open to you, to take such an initiative as to alleviate the current tension and restore the trust that has been shattered” M5. If it was intended as a warning to Italy, the letter was too mild;346 if, on the other hand, it was truly intended to urge him to take action, it demonstrated, on the one hand, just how great the “inertia of the democracies” was[347], and on the other, how England had not yet embraced the idea of winning Rome’s support by backing, in some way, its minimal claims against France. And this was precisely what Mussolini replied, in effect, on March 31 to the prime minister, making explicit reference to what, as we shall see, he had said five days earlier while speaking to the squadristi gathered in Rome for the twentieth-anniversary celebrations 348:

In response to the message you addressed to me, I can only refer to my previous statements. I repeat to you what I have said publicly, namely that I consider a long period of peace necessary to safeguard the development of European civilization. This is my deep conviction. At present, however, and while I appreciate your invitation, I do not believe I can take any initiatives before Italy’s rights have been recognized. You will easily understand the reasons.

In my speech, I outlined and specified Italy’s issues with France and their colonial nature.

In doing so, I believe I have facilitated any future discussion of these issues.

These were the reasons why Mussolini was convinced he could not distance himself from Germany. This does not mean, however, that he believed relations between Rome and Berlin should continue as before. Far from it. Mussolini now had increasingly clear ideas about Nazi Germany and realized that collaboration with Hitler would be not only difficult and dangerous, but ultimately impossible. Breaking ties with him—or even merely distancing himself—was unthinkable for the time being, but it was necessary to buy time, strengthen Italy’s position, and present a less pliable stance toward Berlin, making many things clear, so as to protect Italian interests as much as possible against Germany’s dynamism and, if possible, to control and curb it. And to wait and see how events unfolded, keeping a closer eye than before on London and Paris and trying to maneuver toward—as Ciano would say on May 1 to Gafencu[349]—a new four- or five-party pact (including Poland) that would contain Hitler.

For the time being, it was not the right moment to speak of an alliance. Its domestic repercussions would have been too negative, and such an alliance would have been premature for now, given that it was first necessary to clarify a whole series of issues with Berlin. It might have been possible to reach such an agreement later, but no longer as a “historic” act; rather, with an awareness of the “political advantage” Italy held—namely, its role as “arbitrator” of the European situation, capable of deciding whether to isolate or encircle Germany in Europe. In short, with an attitude essentially no different from that of Grandi when, on May 20, he commented on and interpreted the conclusion of the “Pact of Steel” to Ciano in a letter that must be read “against the light”—that is, keeping the Grandi-Ciano relationship firmly in mind— Grandi’s hope of once again managing to remain ambassador to London, despite Mussolini’s decision three months earlier to recall him, and his fixed idea that, just as in 1915, Italy would ultimately have to take sides in a potential conflict against its allies of the previous day; a fixation that would also lead him to write in his memoirs, composed in Portugal, that the conclusion of the “Pact of Steel” was not “a definitive act” and that, in any case, “it is my deep conviction that had it not been for the unexpected, lightning-fast collapse of the French army in June 1940 and the retreat of British forces from Dunkirk, Mussolini would not have committed the mad and—alas—irreparable act this time of entering the war on June 10” 350. Grandi wrote in his letter to Ciano351:

The Italian-German military alliance is… the biggest blow that could have been dealt to the policies of the democracies, and it opens up new and vast possibilities for your diplomatic efforts not only toward Berlin but also toward London.

Despite appearances, which may give the impression to the contrary, I am convinced that here in London there is—and will be—much to be done, as a continuation of the Duce's policy, which you established in Milan… The British must have a "tangible" sense, in the minutest details of service no less than in the broad outlines, of the Italian-German "monobloc"… The Milan Pact has definitively shattered the last—and yet, until yesterday, persistent—illusions about what Italy's stance might have been at the outbreak of the conflict.

Until yesterday, there was undoubtedly a state of mind among the French and the British—to the formation of which, unfortunately, certain Italians, who were anti-Assisti because they were anti-fascists, indirectly contributed—namely, the grotesque yet deeply rooted conviction that our "freedom of action" toward Germany constituted in and of itself a vital and permanent interest and such an indispensable necessity for Italy that it would one day compel us to invoke the aid of the democracies ourselves in order to defend (?!) this so-called freedom against Germany. Despite all the ostentatious public declarations to the contrary, France and England have based their policy toward Italy on this calculation, which demonstrates once again how the old game of "freedom of action" was intended, in the calculations of the Quai d'Orsay and the Foreign Office, to serve no other purpose than to weaken our diplomatic, political, and military action both toward Germany and toward France.

The Milan Pact makes us stronger in London and stronger in Berlin; it increases our scope for action on the international stage and makes Fascist Italy the arbiter of both peace and war...

Perhaps the person who best grasped this new stance of Mussolini's was the Romanian Foreign Minister Gafencu, when, as mentioned, he was received by Mussolini on May 1 at Palazzo Venezia. His entire account of the meeting 352 deserves to be quoted, as it is peppered with extremely significant statements by the "Duce" and sharp observations by Gafencu—such as those regarding the insistence with which Mussolini tried to deny that he feared Germany, and the way in which he spoke to him about relations with France and the overture of which he was the bearer (which led Gafencu to write: "I thought I understood that he desired an agreement and that he considered it possible"). For the purposes of our discussion, however, it will suffice to quote only this more concise passage 353:

Mussolini had defied fate for too long not to sense the threat of a reversal that was always possible. Like the fortunate Polycrates, warned by dark premonitions, he seemed concerned with warding off fate. He was troubled by his alliance with Hitler, who commanded infinitely greater forces. He saw himself being dragged down a path he himself had opened, a prisoner of the system to which he owed his life, and of the passions he had unleashed, toward a goal that seemed to him, at the very least, uncertain. Having stirred up the wind, he feared the storm—a storm that was bearing down on him and eluding his control. He still hoped to use the momentum he had gained to navigate through the rocks: his instinct, unlike Hitler's, was not to charge headlong into the obstacle, but to avoid it to his advantage. His awareness of the danger, however, did not free him from the passions that had taken hold of him: old grudges, violent irritations, and constant fluctuations in his self-esteem. Faced with the disaster he sensed, his premonition proved more accurate with each passing day.

Consistent with this approach to relations with Germany, in the days immediately following the occupation of Prague, Ciano was primarily concerned with making it clear to Berlin that, given the agreements between Mussolini and Hitler, the Mediterranean belonged to the Italians and the Germans were absolutely not to interfere—and that the term “Mediterranean” also included the Adriatic and, therefore, Yugoslavia. As Ciano told von Mackensen on March 17,[354] it had to be clear that while Italy had taken virtually no interest in what had happened in Czechoslovakia, it could not possibly adopt the same attitude toward any events involving Croatia. We are pursuing—in full agreement with Germany, which has done the same—a policy of close and cordial cooperation with Belgrade, and we regard the status quo in Yugoslavia as a fundamental element in the balance of Central Europe. On the other hand, the Führer has always proclaimed Germany’s lack of interest in the Mediterranean in general, and in the Adriatic in particular, which we consider—and intend to continue considering in the future—as an Italian sea.

Three days later, the German ambassador responded to this statement, assuring that Germany had “no ambitions in any part of the Mediterranean, which the Führer considers an Italian sea” and that “if the Croatian question arises, it will be Germany’s turn to disengage entirely from that problem, leaving its resolution to Italy” 355. It is in connection with this German communication that Ciano’s diary reveals just how far Mussolini’s distrust of Berlin had already gone: to his son-in-law, who relayed it to him, he said he found it “interesting”... “provided one can believe it” 356. On the same day, von Ribbentrop wrote to Ciano a fawning (the adjective, more appropriate than ever, is Toscano’s 357) letter in which he reiterated the same points 358, and Hitler received Attolico and gave him a realistic overview of the European situation, letting him understand that he did not foresee the possibility of a conflict with England and France for another eighteen months to two years, as Germany first had to equip itself with a suitable fleet 359. These actions were followed, again on the German side, by the sending, on the 21st, of a communication to General Pariani stating that they were ready to immediately begin technical talks between the respective general staffs 360 and, on the 25th, by a letter from Hitler to Mussolini. In it 361 the Führer, taking

361 See M. Toscano, *Le origini diplomatiche del Patto d’acciaio*, op. cit., pp. 184 ff. Upon delivering the letter, von Mackensen pointed out that it was to remain secret (ibid., p. 186, note).

the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Fasci di combattimento, first acknowledged Mussolini’s “historic role”:

I am aware of this: that from that day on, the evolution of Europe—and with it, that of humanity—has been set on a new course. It is impossible to imagine what consequences a Bolshevization of Italy would have brought upon the West. It is certain that, without your historic act of founding Fascism, Italy would have come to such a Bolshevization. Although it is generally difficult to determine, in the life of nations, the specific elements that shape the knowledge of individuals or the overall contributions made by the attitudes and actions of peoples, nevertheless, Duce, your contribution and the example of Fascism can be established on the basis of numerous positive achievements. The regeneration not only of Italy but also of Europe in the 20th century remains forever linked to your name.

He then assured him that he had made “an unyielding decision”:

Whatever path you may take, Duce, you must see in me—and in us—unwavering friends. And you must view this friendship not merely as a sign of purely platonic allegiance, but as the unshakable resolve to draw, if necessary, even in the most difficult moments, the ultimate consequences of this

solidarity.

All these passages clearly indicated that Berlin was concerned about Mussolini's reactions and was seeking to appease them at all costs, in order to induce him to resume his march along the path of the alliance. The results, however, were not very promising. We have already mentioned Mussolini's reaction when, on March 20, Ciano informed him of von Mackensen's response to his note of three days earlier. Two days later, he received Attolico, who had come from Berlin for consultations and to report on his meeting with Hitler. In a report to Ciano a few days earlier, the ambassador had already expressed his opinion on the indispensability of a thorough clarification with the Germans "for the very future of the Axis and before obligations and ties are further cemented within a framework—whether between two or three parties" and, in particular, had pointed out the need to clarify whether Berlin intended to reserve for Italy "only the waters of the Mediterranean" and thus exclude it from the Balkans 362. With Mussolini, he had "emphasized the need to dot the i's in our mutual relations, given that the Germans are slipping—sometimes without realizing it—from the realm of power to that of arrogance and could clash with our interests." And the "Duce" had found himself in complete agreement with him.

The Duce—Ciano noted 363—had thoroughly analyzed the current situation, including in relation to Italian public sentiment, and concluded that in order to continue the Axis policy, it was necessary to define the objectives of each country's policy, establish the zones of influence and action for the two countries, and have Germany reabsorb the non-German-speaking populations of South Tyrol.

And when he had received Hitler's letter, he had been pleased with it, but had not attached particular importance to it and had immediately pointed out that the fact that he was asked not to make it public greatly diminished its value.[364] Four days later, on March 29, he in fact drafted this brief but telling note (also due to the order in which the issues were listed) for Ciano:[365]

Issues to be discussed with von Ribbentrop:

a) objectives—in terms of both space and time—of German policy;

b) Italy's economic positions in the Danube and Balkan regions;

c) Italian-French, Italian-Yugoslav, and Italian-Albanian relations;

d) the expulsion of Germans from South Tyrol;

e) a military alliance among the countries of the Triangle.

This was as far as the diplomatic maneuvering at Palazzo Venezia and Palazzo Chigi was concerned, conducted through the confidential channels of the embassies. In the open, for the general public, for the Italians, but also—and even more so—for the chancelleries in Berlin, Paris, and London, the pivotal moment—the fundamental political act and, in a certain sense, the turning point in Mussolini's policy after Prague—was the speech to the "old guard" squadristi, delivered by the "Duce" at the Foro Mussolini on the morning of March 26 as part of the celebrations marking the 20th anniversary of the Fasci. Of this speech—which was to be Mussolini's last address to the Fascist masses—the entire central section was devoted to foreign policy. Formally, it was entirely pro-Axis (so much so that Ciano noted that those among the Fascist leaders present who were opposed to the Axis, such as the Quadrumviri, were "grumbling" as they listened 366), in reality, when read with an understanding of

what was happening behind the scenes, it reveals Mussolini's effort to meet three requirements: to assert the validity of the Axis in terms that would not jeopardize its future transformation into an alliance, but, at the same time, to set the record straight regarding relations with Germany and to open a window of opportunity—to send a signal to France. This was the same France with which Ciano had already attempted, on March 19, to resume the pourparlers with Baudouin by sending his own emissary to Paris for that purpose—though France seemed reluctant to do so 367. Nor was there any lack, even in the absence of an explicit reference, of a response to Chamberlain's letter of March 20, which foreshadowed the substance of the official letter to follow a few days later. Italy, Mussolini essentially said 368, was aware of the gravity of the international situation, but was not succumbing "to what is now known as war psychosis, a mixture of hysteria and fear." "Our course is set, and our principles are clear." Professional pacifism and perpetual peace were not part of the Fascist heritage, which, on the contrary, considered them "a catastrophe for human civilization." But "we consider that a long period of peace is necessary to safeguard the development of European civilization." At this point came the response to Chamberlain and the invitation (sincere, but one that was by now inevitably perceived as blackmail and, above all, could not be trusted) to London to convince Paris to accept Italy's claims: "But, however recently urged, we will take no initiative whatsoever until our sacrosanct rights have been recognized." Having made this first point clear, the speech moved on to address relations with Germany. First and foremost, it asserted the full validity of the Axis:

The era of "waltzing" around, if it ever existed, is definitively over. The mere mention of it is offensive to us and to all Italians.

Attempts to undermine or weaken the Rome-Berlin Axis are childish. The Axis is not merely a relationship between two states: it is a convergence of two revolutions that stand in stark opposition to all other conceptions of contemporary civilization. Herein lies the strength of the Axis, and herein lie the conditions for its endurance.

Then, justifying what had happened in Czechoslovakia as "inevitable." And, finally, warning that if the longed-for formation of a coalition against authoritarian regimes were to take place, these regimes would rise to the challenge and launch a counterattack across the globe.

This was, so to speak, a double-edged statement, since while on the one hand it was clearly directed against plans to create a "democratic bloc," on the other hand it could be understood as a reassurance to London and Paris: no "democratic bloc," no Italian-German-Japanese alliance. So far, one might say, all was well for Germany. Except that a little further on, the discussion of Germany—even if not explicitly named—returned again and again in a completely different tone and with a stark directness that left no doubt either about the intended recipient or about the decisive importance Mussolini attributed to the issue as it pertained to Italian-German relations:

Geographically, historically, politically, and militarily, the Mediterranean is a vital space for Italy, and when we say "Mediterranean," we naturally include that gulf known as the Adriatic, where Italy's interests are preeminent—though not exclusive—in relation to the Slavs, and that is why peace has reigned there for two years.

After discussing relations with Germany, Mussolini moved on to address those with France. The entire speech had been prepared by Mussolini and Ciano with great care and skill; this, however, was to be the most difficult part to craft and calibrate down to the very words, since it was from this that, in essence, the most important results were expected. And this time, Mussolini—mindful of what had happened on November 30 in the Chamber of Deputies and the consequences that had ensued—had

taken every precaution. As M. Luciolli recounted in his first book of memoirs, published under the pseudonym M. Donosti immediately after the end of World War II 369, the day before he had ordered Starace “to do everything possible to prevent the audience, believing they were pleasing him, from indulging in excessive anti-French outbursts.” “If tomorrow,” he had told him, “when I speak about France, the Fascists do not start shouting insults, I will be a happy man.”

At least officially, the sticking point—the main obstacle to a rapprochement—had been Spain, and it was from this that Mussolini significantly began his argument:

In my speech in Genoa, I spoke of a barricade separating Italy from France. This barricade can be considered largely demolished, and in a few days—perhaps in a few hours—the magnificent infantry of Nationalist Spain will deliver the final blow, and that Madrid, where the leftists expected the tomb of fascism, will instead be the tomb of communism.

We do not seek the world’s judgment, but we wish for the world to be informed.

Now, the Italian note of December 17, 1938, clearly set forth Italy’s issues with France: issues of a colonial nature—namely, Tunisia, Djibouti, and the Suez Canal.

The French government is perfectly free to refuse even to discuss these issues, as it has done thus far through its all-too-frequent and all-too-categorical “never.”

It will have no one to blame but itself if the rift currently dividing the two countries becomes so deep that bridging it will be an arduous, if not impossible, task. However events may unfold, we wish that there be no more talk of brotherhood, sisterhood, kinship, or other such spurious familial ties, because relations between states are relations of power, and these relations of power are the determining factors of their politics.

He concluded his speech with one final point, “the last, but fundamental and decisive one: we must arm ourselves”:

this is the watchword: more cannons, more ships, more airplanes. At any cost, at any price, even if it means making a “clean sweep” of everything we call civilized life. When one is strong, one is cherished by friends and feared by enemies.

Since prehistoric times, a cry has echoed through the centuries and across generations: “Woe to the defenseless!”

Just as Mussolini had anticipated, the echoes of the speech were immediate and significant. In London, on March 27, *The Times* gave it a largely positive review:

One can expect a certain vigor of speech and action from a Fascist leader, and yesterday the Foro Mussolini in Rome provided a natural setting for this. It was the twentieth anniversary of the founding of that remarkable movement which has transformed Italian life and created an entirely new system of state-controlled economy; and Mr. Mussolini certainly did not disappoint his followers. But, for all its exaggerations and grandiloquence, the Duce’s speech did not present France with demands that would require a purely negative response; and it contained a specific proposal that the French government begin discussions on the three North African issues that divide the two countries. Regarding at least two of these, it can be said that the circumstances have been altered by recent events, and certain

adjustments would seem to impartial observers to be appropriate subjects for discussion. With the help of skillful diplomacy, the speech may mark a turning point in the European situation. Mr. Mussolini has, at the very least, created a new starting point.

In Paris, the reactions were less favorable, but—at least in part—not entirely negative. The *Le Temps* of the same day, March 26, observed that "the three points indicated by Mr. Mussolini—Tunisia, Djibouti, and Suez, constitute a program that is, as one must agree, much more modest than the one presented with such vehemence by the Fascist press, which included even extravagant demands, such as those concerning Corsica, Nice, and Savoy," and went so far as to wonder, pending knowledge of the precise terms of the Italian demands, whether they might constitute "a useful basis for negotiation." According to François-Poncet, as has been noted, the speech was not to be interpreted negatively, and he was of the opinion that one should not risk dismissing it and that it would be advisable to urge Mussolini to lay his cards on the table and formulate his demands precisely. But the Quai d'Orsay did not heed his advice 370, and on March 29, Daladier rejected Mussolini's overture—and, more importantly, any Italian claims—in a harsh radio address 371. This was both because such claims were unfounded—given that the January 1935 agreements had been intended to "definitively settle" and "resolve" the pending issues between the two countries and remained valid for France—and because accepting the Italian position expressed in the note of December 17 would mean that any new conquest or concession would give rise to new rights. Thus, any claims that might be presented to us would be practically limitless, because each one, once satisfied, would in turn give rise to future claims.

Thus, France's response was: "We will not cede a single arpent of our land, nor a single one of our rights."

The statement had been prepared during two meetings of the Council of Ministers that had seen two opposing factions clash: Daladier, supported by Reynaud, Campinchi, Mandel, Champetier de Ribes, and Zay—and, outside the government, by Léger—who advocated intransigence; Bonnet, Monzie, Chautemps, and Marchandeau, advocates of a flexible approach and willing, at the very least, to negotiate. In the end, the intransigent faction prevailed, partly out of narrow-minded nationalism and partly out of the conviction that Mussolini could not be trusted 372. Although Mussolini pretended to have expected it and to attach no importance to it, Daladier's response[373] was a serious blow to him and, more importantly, led him to take the worst possible step he could have taken at that moment.

During the days of Czechoslovakia's dismemberment, Ciano, as we have seen, had pressed hard to persuade Mussolini to seize the opportunity to occupy Albania. The "Duce" had wavered, but then, much to his son-in-law's disappointment, his political judgment had prevailed, and he had said no. So much so that Ciano, speaking with von Mackensen on March 17, had denied the validity of rumors of a possible Italian action in that country. On March 23, Mussolini had partially reversed his decision and told Ciano to "speed up" the operation; in the following days, he had also discussed the matter with the king, who had expressed opposition to "risking a major adventure just to 'pick up a few stones'" 374. However, he did not give the actual go-ahead until

It was probably precisely because the king's hostility toward the occupation of Albania was well known that Mussolini, in August, yielded to his son-in-law's insistence and pressured the sovereign—as he had done after Daladier's speech and his response to it on March 31 in Reggio Calabria 375, with a very brief but significant remark:

"After my speech to the squadristi in Rome, there is very little to add. We do not forget; we prepare ourselves; we think in terms of decades, and therefore we are always ready to wait—as is certain of a

people that has many weapons and a steadfast heart."

And almost until the very end—at least until early April—it is likely that he favored an "agreement" with King Zog that would settle relations between the two countries in a manner fully "satisfactory" to Italy (military occupation and a protectorate), avoiding a solution involving full-scale military force, the risks of which he, too, understood 376. Only in the very last few days, having by then psychologically committed himself to the operation, did he too become a supporter of the total solution.

There is no doubt that Ciano played a very significant—and perhaps decisive—role in Mussolini's decision to occupy Albania. One need only consider how he threw himself headlong into the operation, going so far as to leave Palazzo Chigi at the most diplomatically tense moment to personally oversee the action in "his" Albania (so much so that in his diary, on April 12, he went so far as to write, referring to the Albanians: "Everyone agrees on having a prince from the House of Savoy, or, better yet, they'd like me" 377), and how, as always, he would take credit for having been the architect of it all. Another factor was his desire, on the one hand, to demonstrate to Italians that the Axis was not merely a one-way street but also provided tangible "benefits" to Italy, and, on the other hand, to put an end to German maneuvering in that country and counterbalance Berlin's growing influence in the Balkans. Politically, however, for Mussolini, the occupation of Albania at that moment was intended above all as a response to France and, to a lesser extent, to England—a way of making them understand that Fascist Italy, after Prague, was not, as many thought, on the ropes, and that it was therefore necessary to negotiate with it and accept its demands.

In practical terms, the occupation of Albania was easy, despite the uncertainties that persisted until the very end regarding how King Zog would react—given that, on previous occasions when the national territory had been expanded, he had awarded Ciano the Collar of the Annunciation. This is suggested by the reference, in the letter he wrote to him on August 7, to the fact that "excluding Count Ciano would carry significance and would be interpreted unfavorably." See, on this episode, G. B. Guerri, *Galeazzo Ciano*, op. cit., pp. 388 ff.

In the very final phase, Mussolini became a staunch advocate of the most radical solution: see G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 277.

the Italian ultimatum (as late as April 6, the Foreign Ministry distributed to the Air Force two types of leaflets to be dropped over the country—one in the event of a landing with the king's consent and one in the event of an intervention against his will 378), the organizational shortcomings and lack of preparedness of the units revealed by it, and the confusion that characterized the entire operation 379. Within two days, on April 7 and 8, everything was resolved. Zog left the country; a phantom Constituent Assembly decided to offer the Albanian crown to the King of Italy; and less than ten days later, the ceremony for the "offer" to Victor Emmanuel took place in Rome, and he accepted it under the terms of a "personal union." Far from being of little consequence, however, were the reactions of the Italian public, which saw this as yet another act that exacerbated the international situation and worsened Italy's standing with the Western powers. In Bologna, there was even an incident in which a battalion of Bersaglieri sang "We want peace, not war" without the officers intervening.[380] The international reactions were also extremely serious.

According to von Mackensen, in the days leading up to the event, people in Rome were discussing the operation in Albania even in movie theaters and cafés. It is therefore not surprising that all the major foreign ministries knew that Italy was preparing something. Palazzo Chigi, for its part, had in some way forewarned Berlin and, above all, Belgrade of the matter.[381] On April 4, Perth, referring to

persistent rumors of an imminent Italian coup, had warned Ciano against taking actions that could lead to a "definite breach" of the "Easter Agreements."[382] Mussolini, who—given Ciano's absence—had taken the reins at Palazzo Chigi, immediately set about trying to reassure the Foreign Office. Between April 5 and 9, he had been in constant telephone contact with the embassy in London (headed at that time by Chargé d'Affaires Crolla, as Grandi was in Italy), sending instructions and messages to Chamberlain and Halifax in which he reaffirmed his determination to keep the previous year's agreements absolutely intact, arguing that the action to which Italy had been compelled by the situation that had

383 M. Donosti [M. Luciolli], *Mussolini and Europe*, op. cit., p. 165, observes in this regard: "From a diplomatic standpoint, the Foreign Minister's absence undoubtedly benefited Italy. Mussolini, forced to act personally, handled the matter with greater calm and skill than his son-in-law."

had arisen in Albania did not conflict with them, and he offered the strongest assurances regarding the groundlessness of the fears that Italy's action had aroused in Belgrade and even more so in Athens (where it was feared that Italy might also seek to lay claim to Corfu); and, confirming the importance he attached "to the consolidation of the existing ties between our two nations," he also offered assurances regarding the now imminent repatriation of all Italian legionnaires in Spain, which was to take place immediately after the victory parade that Franco was preparing in Madrid 384. Apparently, the British reaction to these events had been very positive. Halifax, with whom Crolla had met on several occasions, had shown himself to be quite "understanding" and, also on behalf of Chamberlain, "confident" and "eager" that cooperation between the two countries would continue "in the interest of European peace." On April 9, Crolla was thus able to transmit the following communication from the British government to Rome in response to those sent to him by Mussolini 385:

Please convey to the Duce and Count Ciano that the British government earnestly hopes that the Anglo-Italian agreement—to which it has always attached the utmost importance—may yield the greatest and most fruitful results. We concluded it despite all opposition, and we have maintained it in the face of that opposition. It is therefore obvious that we wish to ensure that it can contribute effectively to the maintenance of the friendly relations existing between our two countries.

The British Empire has vital interests around the world that it cannot fail to safeguard; please assure Mr. Mussolini that the British Government is far from wishing to do anything that might hinder the maintenance of that European peace to which the Duce referred in his recent speech, as we were pleased to note.

Although it is inevitable that the forcible occupation of a state with a Mediterranean coastline will appear to British public opinion as highly incompatible with the article of the Anglo-Italian Agreement concerning the maintenance of the Mediterranean status quo, this by no means implies that we do not wish—as is, in fact, our firm intention—to make every effort to achieve, through that very agreement, an improvement in relations between our two countries and their cooperation for the cause of peace.

In reality, the Albanian affair had had a completely different effect on London than what might have seemed at first glance: it had confirmed Chamberlain and the Foreign Office in their conviction that Mussolini could no longer be relied upon and that there was no choice but to regard him, on a par with Hitler, as an enemy—except to see what his attitude would be in the event of a conflict, but without counting in the slightest on his possible last-minute change of heart. In this context, the fact that the British had not denounced the "Easter Agreements" following the occupation of Albania meant nothing more than a desire not to do anything that might push Mussolini even further toward Hitler.

Chamberlain's statements on April 13 in the House of Commons appear, within this logic, to be beyond reproach, even though they came as a complete surprise to Rome, as did the concrete measures that the British government subsequently took: the introduction of compulsory conscription, agreements with Turkey, the strengthening of military preparations in Egypt and Malta, the expansion of broadcasts from Radio Daventry to counter Radio Bari's propaganda (which had resumed in March) among the Arabs, etc.

"The overall effects of Italy's actions," Chamberlain told the House of Commons[386], "fully justified the impression they had made on world public opinion. Nor was it conceivable that the British government would remain indifferent to what had happened or fail to regard it as a matter of 'the utmost importance' to prevent further changes to the status quo in the Mediterranean and the Balkan Peninsula."

Consequently, His Majesty's Government has reached the conclusion that, in the event of an action that clearly threatens the independence of Greece or Romania—and which the Greek or Romanian Government, respectively, deems necessary to resist with its national forces—the British Government will feel compelled to immediately provide the Greek or Romanian Government, as the case may be, with all the assistance within its power.

Following this introduction, the Prime Minister went on to discuss the Anglo-Italian agreements, reiterating the reasons why he had believed in their effectiveness and rejecting the notion that he should accept the viewpoint of those (including Churchill, who spoke after him and who also criticized the fact that the fleet had not been sent "not far from the mouth of the Adriatic Sea," in order to bring about a clear resolution with Italy), who were calling for their denunciation, but also stating in no uncertain terms that the Italian government's actions had "cast a shadow over the sincerity of its intentions to fulfill its commitments" made to them. And he concluded with these firm words:

Today we must strengthen our resolve: a resolve aimed not only at making ourselves strong to defend our country, but also at doing our part to come to the aid of those who, when attacked or threatened with the loss of their freedom, decide to resist.

Through the "secret channel" in London, Mussolini had been forewarned as early as April 11 that, despite the assurances of the previous days, Chamberlain would announce the guarantee to Greece (nothing had been said to him regarding Romania, probably because this guarantee was essentially intended as an anti-German measure), and he had tried to avert it by offering in exchange an order for the immediate withdrawal of most of the legionnaires from Spain without waiting for the victory parade. The response, however, had been blunt: the prime minister "advised" the "Duce" to recall the legionnaires "in any case," "without setting conditions" 387. Nevertheless, as we mentioned, Chamberlain's speech came as a surprise to Rome, if only because of the firmness of its tone and what it foreshadowed for the future of Anglo-Italian relations. Mussolini, speaking that very evening of April 13, tried in vain to project

confidence:

The historical events unfolding in these days are the result of our will, our faith, and our strength.

Toward friendly nations, we approach with a friendly attitude; toward hostile nations, we will adopt a clear, firm, and resolute attitude of hostility.

The world is asked to leave us in peace, as we go about our great and daily toil. The world must in any case know that tomorrow, as yesterday, as always, we will press on.

And, a week later, taking advantage of the "major report" for the 1942 World's Fair 3," he instead sought to emphasize the peaceful intentions of Fascist Italy. But to no avail, Ciano, speaking in the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations on April 15, hastened to reassure Chamberlain by reaffirming Italy's willingness to "keep the 'Easter Agreements' 39 valid and in force through the implementation and observance of all their clauses." Within a couple of weeks, relations between London and Rome had grown so cold that when, on April 21, Mussolini, receiving Perth on a farewell visit, spoke to him about the contacts that had taken place between Ciano and Baudouin, telling him he was willing to continue them provided the French took the next step and that he inform London of this, the British ambassador remained strictly general in his remarks: the British would welcome an agreement between Rome and Paris, but he believed that the outstanding issues between the two governments should be resolved between the parties

concerned.[391] Another démarche, made immediately after Hitler's speech on April 28 in which he had raised the issue of Danzig's "return" to the Reich, by Grandi directly to Halifax—suggesting that Mussolini might intervene to moderate Hitler if his prestige were bolstered by the start of negotiations between Rome and Paris—had the same outcome: the British foreign minister, too, left the offer

unanswered.

In both cases (as well as regarding what Mussolini and Ciano told Gafencu), London informed Paris of the Italian overtures and Franco-Italian relations. Halifax discussed these matters first with the French ambassador in London and then, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter, on May 20–21 with Daladier and Bonnet, making no secret of the opportunity to use Italian influence over Germany "to prevent the final catastrophe" and, therefore, to grant Mussolini some "reasonable satisfaction." However, faced with Daladier's arguments that this would serve no purpose and that, in any case, Italy would have to offer some compensation—otherwise French prestige in the Arab world would suffer—the British did not feel inclined to insist 393; probably to avoid giving new fuel to the usual French suspicions, but above all because they, too, were by then privately convinced of the validity of the French objections and had raised the issue only out of a sense of moral duty. The same scruples of conscience were, in fact, present among the French as well—and indeed, they were even more pronounced there, both because of France's greater exposure to the risks of a conflict and because—as Duroselle rightly wrote 394—French policy "remained uncertain and disorganized," and, finally, because of the much greater diversity of opinions within the French government compared to the British government regarding relations with Italy. This explains why—despite assurances to the contrary given to the British—immediately after the conquest of Albania, in the face of recurring reports from Rome and elsewhere regarding Italy's willingness to resolve the dispute between the two countries by settling for very little, and in light of statements such as those made by Ciano to the Soviet chargé d'affaires: "every effort is being made to push us further into Germany's arms every day," not only did Bonnet show himself willing to resume the exploratory talks initiated by Baudouin, but even Daladier considered the issue. A note of his dated April 17 demonstrates this: "Should we remain still and await Mussolini's response; should we begin negotiations with M.; should we let things take their course?" In this climate, a request by François-Poncet on April 15—aimed at obtaining authorization to make contact with Palazzo Chigi to ascertain Italy's true intentions and "the extent to which there is still a possibility of safeguarding peace" through Mussolini—had received a somewhat positive response from Bonnet: "The French government, not being the one making the request, has no proposal to put forward; but it has never crossed my mind to forbid you from having any conversation with the

Italian government." And about ten days later, upon learning the outcome of the inquiry immediately conducted by François-Poncet on April 25 regarding Ciano—namely, the actual substance of the Italian demands (a free zone in Djibouti, the transfer of the Ethiopian section of the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway, two seats on the board of the Suez Company, a revision of the canal tariffs, and a return, for Tunisia, to the 1896 statute)—and Rome's unease over the direction German-Polish relations were taking—it was within this same climate that first the new inquiry via Gafencu and, immediately afterward, the authorization on May 3 for the ambassador in Rome to resume the pourparlers had emerged. Conducted with the best of intentions, François-Poncet's probe of April 25 had, in the meantime, begun to have its first effects in Rome—effects that would soon prove, contrary to expectations, to be detrimental.

We have seen how the breakup of Czechoslovakia had led Mussolini to postpone the conclusion of the alliance with Germany and to make it contingent upon a prior fundamental clarification of relations with Berlin. The Albanian affair, however, had temporarily pushed this clarification into the background. Ciano, wholly focused on carrying out his plan, had even considered approaching the Germans to request their solidarity and support as a sort of quid pro quo for Italy's stance during the Czechoslovak crisis. To this end, he had drafted a letter that the "Duce" was supposed to send to Hitler; Mussolini, however, had done nothing with it. The Germans were thus informed of the "sudden deterioration" in relations with Tirana and of the decision to resolve the situation at its root only on April 4. The crisis in relations with England caused by the occupation of Albania and the subsequent straining of relations between Berlin and Warsaw over the issue of

Danzig, however, had caused matters with Berlin to come to a head. Between April 14 and 17, Göring had been in Rome. The purpose of the visit was evidently to dispel the "shadows of Prague" and to quickly restart the negotiations for the three-power alliance. Göring had undoubtedly been skillful: he had emphasized the strength of the Axis, but had stated that, from a military standpoint, the most favorable balance of power vis-à-vis the Anglo-French would not be achieved before 1942–43; he had spoken of strained relations with Poland, but had said that Hitler was not planning any action against it; he had assured Mussolini that Yugoslavia fell entirely within Italy's sphere of influence and that Germany sought only to safeguard "its normal economic interests" in that country; and he had shown himself to be essentially in agreement with Mussolini on all the issues close to his heart, not least that for at least two or three years the disagreements between Rome and Paris would not lead to a conflict 397. All of this must have, in a certain sense, reassured Mussolini and led him to believe that he had ample time to carry out his plans, re-engage London, and persuade Paris to meet his minimum demands. Ciano's notes confirm this, particularly the last one dated April 17, 398:

Overall, the impression conveyed is that Germany's intentions are also peaceful. There is only one danger: Poland. More than what he said, I was struck by the contemptuous tone used toward Warsaw. But let the Germans not believe that they will be able to make a triumphal march through Poland either: if attacked, the Poles will fight back. The Duce thinks so too.

Just how real the danger of a German-Polish conflict was was dramatically confirmed three days later by "a very serious" report sent by Attolico, announcing that German action was imminent. Noting this in his diary[3], Ciano had written:

It would be war, so we have the right to be informed in advance. We must be able to prepare ourselves and we must prepare public opinion for an event that cannot come as a surprise. I have therefore ordered Attolico to expedite my meeting with Ribbentrop.

Faced with the threat of a new and more dramatic German initiative along the lines of the one a month earlier, it had become urgent to dot the “i’s” with Berlin. Nothing, however, suggests that the intention in the meeting with von Ribbentrop was to revisit the issue of the alliance.

That would have had to be discussed later, after all preliminary issues had been thoroughly clarified. Moreover, the new developments that would lay the groundwork for the shift in the nature of the meeting—as compared to Italy’s original intentions—occurred after the decision to expedite the clarification process. In fact, it was not until the morning of April 25 that a telegram from Attolico arrived at Palazzo Chigi announcing that negotiations with the Japanese had turned out to be “completely unsuccessful” and that, consequently, von Ribbentrop was of the opinion that Germany and Italy should “reach an agreement among themselves in the meantime through a bilateral pact, leaving Japan the possibility of joining it at a later date” and that the German foreign minister would consequently go to the meeting with Ciano with a draft of bilateral pact 400. Then, in the afternoon, François-Poncet had sounded out Ciano regarding Italy’s actual demands on France—the first such inquiry, given its source, to carry an official weight for the Italians.

Mussolini’s reactions to these two new developments are of the utmost interest to us. Upon being informed of the first, the “Duce” said he was pleased. “In reality,” Ciano noted,[401] “for quite some time now he had considered Japan’s participation more harmful than helpful. We will meet with Ribbentrop on the 6th in some city in northern Italy to define our common policy.” Thus, there was still nothing to indicate that the Italian side wished, for the time being, to resume discussions—even if only bilaterally—regarding the alliance. This is confirmed by the fact that, although Attolico had stated in his aforementioned telegram that von Ribbentrop—in addition to telling him he would bring his own draft treaty—had instructed him to convey to Ciano an invitation to do the same, Palazzo Chigi did not even bother to bring its own draft. As for François-Poncet’s feeler, upon hearing the news, Mussolini made a point of not attaching too much importance to it, but added a comment that was extremely revealing of his intentions: “In any case, I do not intend to begin negotiations with France until after the treaty with Germany has been signed” 402. Moreover, the fact that his apparent indifference to the news was merely for show is demonstrated by how, on May 1 and 2, he went out of his way to convey to Gafencu that he sincerely desired an agreement with France, and Ciano, in turn, insisted on making it clear to the Romanian minister that an agreement needed to be reached quickly.

The truth is that Mussolini, beginning to realize the risk of having less time than he had previously believed and absolutely unwilling at that moment to face a conflict—which, above all, he knew full well he was completely unprepared to handle 403—wanted, as usual, to be able to play both sides simultaneously, keeping the door open both to Berlin and to London and Paris, and to reestablish his role as the kingmaker of Europe. He wanted, at the very least, to initiate negotiations with Paris so that he could negotiate with the Germans from a stronger position—both internationally and domestically (negotiations with France would, in fact, have allayed many domestic concerns about the future, satisfied certain aspirations genuinely felt by a segment of the Italian population, and perhaps made the prospect of an alliance with Germany less unpopular); and then, once the alliance with Berlin had been concluded on his own terms, he could use it to conclude negotiations with the French on the best terms as well, especially regarding Tunisia—the only point on which it was clear that, once the French had taken the step of sitting down at the negotiating table, they would prove to be more “stingy.” After that, bolstered by the alliance with Germany but having regained—for better or worse—the trust of Paris and London, he could have returned to reviving his plans for a new “European system.” This is confirmed by the speeches made at Gafencu on the need—if war was to be avoided—to convene “a new conference,” that is, a “new Munich,” which would “finally bring about the four-power pact” or even “the five-power pact with Poland.” This latter idea alone reveals Mussolini’s true feelings toward

Germany. Not to mention that, through the alliance—Mussolini, by then alarmed by Göring's speeches, by the news from Attolico, and, a few days later, by Hitler's speech on April 29—he must have been convinced that he could better control the Germans and prevent them both from taking their efforts to annex Danzig to the extreme and from giving their plans—aimed at completely isolating Warsaw—a character he found unacceptable, namely a rapprochement with the USSR. Mussolini agreed with this latter move, provided—as had been immediately made clear to Göring, who had spoken to him about it 404—that it remained a "petit jeu" that did not entail ideological concessions or internal difficulties. Although he realized the need to move quickly, Mussolini did not therefore believe that the issue of the alliance should be specifically addressed at the meeting between Ciano and von Ribbentrop on May 6–7. Its sole purpose was to be the precise definition of the general political framework and the specific terms of the relationship between the two countries.

403 Mussolini spoke about the seriousness of Italy's military unpreparedness at a special Cabinet meeting held on April 29, following a series of discussions he had had with De Bono, Cavagnari, Valle, and, above all, Pariani, expressing his strong dissatisfaction with the situation—with the sole exception of the Navy. According to G. Bottai (Diary, op. cit., ff. 652 ff.), he said: "I must say that this Army Administration is not working. One can never be sure of anything. Its figures are never accurate. We have been misled regarding the artillery. We have insufficient and outdated artillery. The same applies to the Air Force: there is always a certain discrepancy between the announced figures and the actual figures. Not so with the Navy. The Navy is scrupulously precise." See also G. Ciano, Diary, op. cit., p. 290.

The best confirmation of this is found in two documents of great importance to us. The notes prepared by the Legal Office of the Wilhelmstrasse in anticipation of the meeting between the two foreign ministers prove that on May 4, Berlin—despite having drafted a treaty outline—did not expect a decision on the matter to be reached at the meeting and, more importantly, did not rule out the possibility that, instead of an alliance, it might end up being merely "a friendship pact without obligations of military assistance" that would provide, in the event of war, "so-called benevolent neutrality to the greatest extent possible, and this without distinguishing between a war of aggression and a war of defense" 405. As Toscano has already observed 406, this position suggests that in Berlin there were still strong concerns even regarding Rome's actual willingness to enter into a genuine alliance. The second document—and for us, an even more important one—is the lengthy memo that Mussolini prepared on May 4 as a set of guidelines for Ciano's talks. It is a clear document that leaves no doubt as to Mussolini's underlying intentions; not coincidentally, he would later quote the most important part of it verbatim in a subsequent document (the so-called "Cavallero memorandum," named after the general who delivered it to Hitler on his orders), which he drafted on May 30—after the signing of the "Pact of Steel"—to reaffirm the significance and value he attributed to the alliance 407.

Speaking with Göring on April 16, Mussolini had expressed his conviction that "a general war was inevitable"; indeed, he had already stated this—without going back as far as his talks with Hitler—to von Ribbentrop on October 28 of the previous year. "The Duce," as will be recalled, according to the minutes of that meeting drafted by Ciano, "agrees that there will be war within a few years between the Axis, France, and England." And in the concluding part of the German minutes of the conversation with Göring, we read:

Germany and Italy would avoid any provocation that might lead them into a conflict but would wait for what both considered the opportune moment. They would continue to arm themselves and, with a view

to joint action at a later date, would begin discussions on the synchronization of their autarky as well as on the cooperation of their naval and air forces. In the meantime, they would continue the “press war” with the utmost vigor, while refraining from any action on a larger scale. (When, in this regard, the Marshal pointed out that Germany had recently acquired a number of territories and needed peace to assimilate them, the Duce warmly agreed.)

“Talk of peace and prepare for war—that is, victory”—this was to be the motto of the two countries.

This same motto concluded the memo for Ciano drafted by Mussolini on May 4. However, the rest of the memo referred not so much to war as to its preparation and, while this was underway, to the maintenance of peace. War, it was explicitly stated, required “a period of peace”—that is, a period of preparation—“lasting no less than three years” in order to be waged. As far as Italy was concerned, this period was “necessary”

a) to establish military control over Libya and Albania and to pacify Ethiopia, from which an army of half a million men must be raised;

b) to complete the construction and refitting of the six battleships currently under way;

c) to modernize all our medium- and large-caliber artillery;

d) to press forward with the implementation of the autarkic plans that are intended to thwart any attempt at a blockade by the wealthy democracies;

e) to organize the 1942 Exposition, which, in addition to documenting the first two decades of the Regime, can provide us with foreign currency reserves;

f) to carry out the repatriation of Italians from France, a very serious military and moral issue;

g) to complete the already underway transfer of many war industries from the Po Valley to southern Italy;

h) to further deepen relations not only among the Axis governments but also among the peoples, a process that would undoubtedly benefit from a thaw in relations between the Church and Nazism—a thaw that is also greatly desired by the Vatican.

For all these reasons, Fascist Italy does not wish to precipitate a European war, even though it is convinced that such a war is inevitable. One might even imagine that in three years’ time, Japan will have brought its war in China to a close.

As Toscano 41° has already noted, achieving these objectives would certainly have required more than the three years anticipated; but even if we assume that Mussolini was mistaken in good faith, the fact remains that such a long time frame (at least relative to the actual predictability of international events) stripped the premise upon which the entire argument was based of much of its axiomatic value. This is all the more true given that, during the very days he was preparing the set of instructions for Ciano, Mussolini—as we have already mentioned in Chapter 3—reiterated his orders to close and make impenetrable “the gates of the house,” and first and foremost the Brenner Pass; and this was undoubtedly a strange way to prepare for the “inevitable” war with France and England. The fact is that, as Luciolli411 rightly wrote, after Munich “Mussolini’s bellicosity was in steady decline” or, if

one prefers, it was increasingly a matter of ideology and personality and less and less a political reality. Speaking specifically of the memo to Ciano and the “Cavallero memorandum,” Luciolli also noted that toward the end of 1938, Mussolini began confiding to his aides that the Ethiopian War and the Spanish Civil War had imposed such a strain on the Italian army and finances that it was now necessary to replenish both before facing new challenges.

All of this lends credence to the sincerity of his instructions to Ciano and helps dispel any doubts regarding the possible manipulative intent or insincerity of the statements made personally by Mussolini or conveyed through Ciano regarding Italy’s absolute need for three to four years of peace.

Based on these same considerations and, probably, on what Mussolini stated in point h) of the memo dated May 4—namely, that the three-year period of peace was to serve, among other things, “to deepen ever more the relations not only between the Axis governments, but between the peoples,” an expression that could be translated more simply as “to make the Italians accept the alliance”— Toscano even hinted at the possibility that the “Duce” “implicitly suggested that the assurance of this period constituted, in his eyes, the prerequisite for proceeding further along the path of transforming relations between the two Axis powers”412. As we have already stated, our opinion differs. Mussolini could not wait that long to conclude the alliance; his entire political strategy would have been compromised. Nor —as the facts would demonstrate abundantly—were his concerns about Italian hostility toward the transformation of the Axis into a full-fledged alliance, however vivid and real, sufficient to induce him to alter it. To think so would mean failing to understand both his psychology and the value that the alliance had come to hold for him—both in relation to his plans for “grand European politics” and to his relationship with the “gray zone” of Italians and the regime. This, however, let it be clear, does not mean that he believed the alliance had to be concluded at the Ciano-Ribbentrop meeting of May 6–7.
Nothing, as M. Donosti [M. Luciolli] has noted, Mussolini and Europe, etc., op. cit., p. 189.

M. Toscano, *The Diplomatic Origins of the Pact of Steel*, op. cit., p. 280.

stated, justifies making such a claim or even merely hypothesizing it, and the memo prepared for Ciano is once again the best proof of this. Toward the end (and this, too, is significant), among the various specific issues to be discussed with the Germans, it also addressed the question of a military alliance.

Italy—wrote Mussolini4,3—is in favor of a two- or three-party alliance, depending on the decision made in Tokyo. The military agreements must be carefully prepared so that—once the circumstances are specified—they become effective almost automatically.

As can be seen, not only is there nothing in this paragraph to indicate a desire to form the alliance immediately, but those military agreements that “must be carefully prepared” suggest a different intention and a different timeline. An alliance, then, yes, but at a later date, once the general political framework and the specific terms of the alliance had been clearly defined and the military agreements it was to enshrine had been “carefully” prepared.

Yet, just two days after sending these instructions to Ciano, on the evening of May 6, Mussolini ordered his son-in-law by telephone—who had reported to him on the progress and results achieved so far in his meeting with Ribbentrop—to conclude the alliance. Ciano recounted the event very briefly in his diary:[414]

The alliance—or rather, the immediate announcement of the alliance—was decided on Saturday evening immediately after lunch at the Continental, following a phone call from the Duce. After the

meeting, I had reported to Mussolini the results, which were satisfactory from our point of view. He, as always when he has achieved something, asked for more and instructed me to announce the bilateral pact, which he has always preferred to the tripartite alliance.

Ribbentrop, who deep down has always aimed to include Japan in the Pact, initially hesitated but eventually gave in, subject to Hitler's approval. When contacted by telephone, Hitler gave his immediate approval and personally assisted in drafting the communiqué.

When I informed the Duce of this on Sunday morning, he expressed particular satisfaction.

The obvious question is: What had happened? What had prompted Mussolini to suddenly change his mind?

The two minutes of the Milan meeting on May 6–7 shed no light on the matter. Four and a half years later, while in prison in Verona, Ciano would write:[415]

The decision to form the alliance was made by Mussolini, out of the blue, while I was in Milan with Ribbentrop. Some American newspapers [sic, a slip of the pen for "French"] had reported that the Lombard capital had received the German minister with hostility and that this was proof of Mussolini's diminished personal prestige. Out of anger. I received the most peremptory order by telephone to accede to the German demands for an alliance, which I had left pending for over a year and which I intended to keep pending for a long time yet. Thus was born the Pact of Steel.

Let us not delve into the merits of Ciano's claim that he had been the one to block the German requests for an alliance and that he would have liked to continue doing so for a long time to come. The issue pertains, in fact, primarily to Ciano's biography. Suffice it to say that his diary entries reveal no particular disappointment or frustration that would corroborate what he claimed on the eve of his death. If anything, they suggest a personal fondness for Ribbentrop—a sentiment not easily explained in the context of the alleged setback he suffered in having to comply with the order to conclude the alliance. Furthermore, in the diary entries written after Ciano's return to Rome (that "Saturday" and, above all, that "Sunday" speak for themselves), there is no trace of the explanation that Ciano himself would have given in December 1943 in the text intended to serve as an introduction to his diary; an explanation which, as we shall see, he began circulating only after the Salzburg meeting of August 11, 1939, with von Ribbentrop—that is, only after he had truly become an opponent of the alliance with Germany. Moreover, if one really wants to strain to read between the lines of those sparse notes, the only hint of an interpretation of Mussolini's decision ("he, as always when he has obtained something, asks for more…") would point, if anything, toward other explanations. But setting aside Ciano's personal issue, what is more important to note here is that the Fascist foreign minister's explanation was accepted and practically adopted by all memoirists—with the sole partial exception, as we shall see shortly, of Magistrati—and ultimately came to be accepted in historical scholarship as well. Only Grandi, in his memoirs—which remain unpublished to date and were written in Portugal relying solely on his memory, which explains a few minor factual inaccuracies—offered a more detailed and political explanation, stemming from his deep understanding of psychology, Mussolini's modus operandi, and the ideas Mussolini was entertaining in the first half of 1939[4,6]:

Ciano later recounted—but only after the meeting in Salzburg—the details of how that fateful pact was concluded. He had traveled to Milan to meet with Ribbentrop on May 5. Mussolini had not mentioned the alliance to him at the time of his departure. He had, in fact, discussed it with Ciano earlier. But no decision had been made. The reception Ribbentrop received from the people of Milan was frosty.

Foreign newspaper correspondents, especially the French ones, revealed this in their telegrams from Milan and spoke of booing and hostile demonstrations that, in fact, did not take place. These reports, which reached Rome, exasperated Mussolini, who flew into a rage. He called Ciano on the phone and ordered him to declare to Ribbentrop that Italy was ready to conclude the alliance pact. Ribbentrop, taken by surprise, immediately contacted Berlin. The Führer, of course, left no time for reflection or second thoughts. He gave his approval. The agreement was concluded. All that remained were the details—the text of the agreement—a very easy task. Thus was born the Italian-German alliance.

This is very much in character for Mussolini. But one must not believe that this was the result of a spur-of-the-moment decision. Hitler had offered this alliance to Mussolini the previous May, a year earlier. Mussolini had rejected it. The Germans, there is no doubt, had been actively working in Rome throughout that year to persuade him. For them, the alliance meant scuttling the Italian-British agreement of April 14. Mussolini had always resisted, but the bad seed had taken root and borne fruit in Mussolini's mind. There is no doubt about that. But it is also true that certain personal attitudes of Mussolini suggest that he was not fully convinced. Concerned about French reactions following the ill-fated session in the Chamber of Deputies on November 30, he had in fact scaled back his demands on France and had made no secret of his concerns regarding the occupation of Prague, which entirely undermined the Munich Agreement—in which he had been a key figure, the arbiter, and the moral guarantor of Hitler's promises. Hitler had told him nothing of his intentions to destroy Czechoslovakia. He had learned of it from the newspapers. In Turin, in February (?), he had delivered a speech in favor of European peace. He felt isolated and feared losing his influence over Hitler. Germany was slipping out of his control. He believed he was binding Germany to himself and did not realize that he was binding himself irrevocably to Germany. It is certain that if Mussolini had considered war imminent, he would not have asked Hitler, after reflection, for a commitment to peace for at least 3–4 years. He therefore viewed the alliance pact as a guarantee—albeit a provisional one—of European peace. Mussolini had another Munich in mind—perhaps a series of other Munichs. His "Four-Power Pact." He feared isolation from both sides. Mussolini was mad, but he loved to appear mad, even more than he actually was. At the core, there was always a calculation—that of a distrustful and jealous peasant mixed with blind Caesarism. In signing the pact, he thought he was acquiring the formal right to prior consultation, and this influence was not intended to unleash war, but rather to delay it, perhaps even to avoid it altogether. What he did later, on September 1, confirmed what I am saying.

If we wish to answer the question we have posed, we must therefore ask a question within the question: Can we accept Ciano's explanation, which appears to be the most credible and, in practice, is essentially accepted by everyone? In our view, yes—provided we strip it of the polemical charge against his father-in-law that Ciano inserted into it (which was humanly understandable in December '43, but less so when he began circulating it) and restore its full political context, in light of which Mussolini's "anger" over the reports sent by French correspondents to their newspapers regarding the hostile attitude of the Milanese toward von Ribbentrop (which, moreover, was only partially true, because while it is true that the citizens of Milan received the German delegation with concern and coldness, it is also true that the party had made a major effort to mobilize its members and had organized a very "warm" welcome[417]) becomes an irrelevant fact.

The reports published by various French newspapers in the days immediately preceding the Ciano-Ribbentrop meeting—which went so far as to mention violent clashes with the police in Milan during anti-German demonstrations (reports that allegedly prompted Mussolini, in response, to move the venue of the meeting at the last minute from Villa d'Este on Lake Como to Milan[4,8]) and the reports transmitted by correspondents of those same newspapers from the Lombard capital on May 6 had undoubtedly irritated Mussolini. So much so that the "Duce" felt the need to write, on May 6 itself, the

“Diplomatic Information” No. 30 (published in the Italian press the following day), in which he highlighted “the exceptionally warm welcome that the people of Milan had extended to the German foreign minister” and pilloried those “foreign journalists with a twisted imagination, who specialize in spreading lies as a professional habit” who had claimed the opposite. While the “Duce’s” irritation likely had a personal dimension—typical of many of his reactions—the root of his irritation must have been something else: the fear that these reports would lend credence to the idea of internal weakness within the regime and a consequent weakening of Italian-German relations, which—if exploited by opponents of an agreement with Italy—could in turn cause Paris to withdraw its willingness to negotiate with Rome. To understand Mussolini’s attitude before Ciano reported to him the results of the first day of talks with von Ribbentrop, it must be added that, at the same time as the dispatches that French journalists were sending to Paris (and which Mussolini was monitoring through police wiretaps), the “Duce” was learning, via London, of more precise reports regarding the imminent signing of the Anglo-Turkish mutual assistance agreement, which, in fact, would be officially announced in London and Ankara on May 12. As M. Magistrati419 has rightly pointed out, for Mussolini this news could have only one interpretation: it was a move that was fundamentally and decisively anti-Italian, which, combined with the guarantee to Greece announced by Chamberlain on April 13, demonstrated the British government’s intent to encircle Italy in the Mediterranean. It is no coincidence that the last paragraph of “Diplomatic Information” No. 30 contains a reference to the attempts to “encircle” the Axis. However, in the same “Diplomatic Information” No. 30, there is another statement that is extremely valuable to us. After refuting the reports already published or set to be published the following day by the French press—whether in opposition or simply hostile to Italy—Mussolini, speaking of the ongoing talks in Milan, wrote: “It goes without saying that, according to the assessments of responsible circles in Rome, while nothing substantial will occur, the Axis will emerge further strengthened from the Milan talks.” While this, on the one hand, demonstrates Mussolini’s concern to discredit reports claiming that the Axis had been weakened, on the other hand, it proves that at the time the “Duce” wrote the “Diplomatic Report,” the alliance had not yet been finalized.

Mussolini certainly reached this decision only after Ciano had informed him by telephone of how the first part of the talks with von Ribbentrop had gone, after learning of “the results satisfactory from our point of view” that they had yielded. That is, after learning that the points he had set out in writing in the memo for Ciano had met with German approval; that, as Ciano would write in his minutes of meeting 420, “Germany, too, is convinced of the need for a period of peace that should last no less than four or five years”; and—though this cannot be documented, it is highly probable—that the alliance framework prepared by the Germans provided that the contracting parties would remain “in constant contact for the purpose of reaching agreement on their common interests or on issues of international politics affecting the general European situation,” that any decision regarding how to address threats to the interests and security of the two countries would be made by mutual agreement, and that, in particular, “each of the contracting parties shall take decisions and measures that could lead to a break with England and France only in full agreement with the other contracting party.”421 It was at this point—and only at this point—that Mussolini, believing he had finally obtained everything he wanted from the Germans and could now politically control and influence their moves, and thus be able to present himself to the world in this capacity, decided to have Ciano ask von Ribbentrop to immediately announce the forthcoming signing of the alliance. With this move, all rumors of the regime’s weakness and of a loosening of the Axis were silenced. The French government, if it truly wanted an agreement with Rome—and, according to Mussolini’s logic, it should now want it more than ever—would no longer be in a position to be blackmailed by the opposition and would no longer be able to act so “stingy.” As for the British, they would have had to convince themselves that their hardline policy of encircling Italy was futile and that they needed to change it, given that Mussolini now held the keys to Hitler’s power in his own hands. In this way and following this logic, on the evening of May 6, 1939,

Mussolini's decision was born to conclude what would later go down in history as the "Pact of Steel." It was a sudden decision, but an entirely political one, in which Mussolini's anger, for once, must have played only a very minor role—certainly not a decisive one.

If we wish to move from one political explanation to another, in this case we must not look to an explanation based solely on his personality. Rather, we must look to the concentration of power achieved by Mussolini. A concentration so absolute that it excluded everyone else from the formulation of his fundamental choices and decisions—in practice, from Munich onward, even Ciano. This, however, does not mean absolving Ciano, for the responsibility for this absolute concentration of power, while stemming not only from the totalitarian system in general, on the one hand undoubtedly stems from Mussolini and his progressive moral and ideological decline, on the other hand also stems from his son-in-law, who, for his own power-seeking purposes, had for his part contributed more than anyone else to isolating his father-in-law from everyone else, without possessing the qualities and abilities to be a "good administrator."

Chapter Six

The Moment of Truth:

Mussolini, Fascism, and Italy on the Brink of War

The announcement of the alliance between Italy and Germany and, fifteen days later, on May 22, the solemn ceremony in Berlin for the signing of the Pact of Friendship and Alliance—as the "Pact of Steel" was officially named—were, as one can easily imagine, the focus of attention and commentary around the world. Outside Germany and Italy, these events were almost unanimously interpreted as further evidence of the ever-worsening European situation, of the two dictators' shared aims, and of their hegemonic ambitions—ambitions that by now would not be deterred even by the risk of triggering a general conflict. Mussolini's image—which, as we have seen, had already deteriorated significantly in the eyes of most people in the preceding years and months—emerged further diminished in every respect, and with it went what little confidence in his pragmatism still held by some. By now, almost no one regarded the "Duce" as anything other than Hitler's "second-in-command"—a colorful and boastful figure, irrevocably tied to his master's chariot. The following assessment from the Neuchâtel "Express"[1] serves as a good example:

Mr. Mussolini, who makes no secret of his admiration for the author of *The Prince*, would do well to reflect on its axioms. "The Prince must seek only to increase his power and his territories at the expense of all others." Mr. Mussolini has indeed conquered Ethiopia, which, on the other hand, seems to be a burden to him. But he has allowed Germany to establish itself at the Brenner Pass and encircle Poland. He has also signed a military alliance pact that makes Italy, no matter what happens, a vassal in times of peace and a battlefield in times of war. Neither fox nor lion, the "Duce" has done nothing but stubbornly persist on a path he set out on one evening of resentment. In truth, this is not Machiavellianism, but rather a diabolical persistence in error that heralds the dawn of great catastrophes...

Very few commentators tried to look behind the facade, but even their judgment, in the end, was the same. Mussolini had his problems; he would have liked to pursue a different policy, but by then the path he had set out on left him no other option but to follow

Hitler. A typical example in this regard is a lighthearted article that appeared on June 1, 1939, in a

Canadian magazine, *Maclean's Magazine* of Toronto. After the usual observations on the dictator's physical decline, his isolation from everyone—so at odds with the interest he once showed in relations with foreigners passing through Rome—and his tendency to delegate everything to Ciano (this operetta-style foreign minister, who "with his liveliness and his gait, could play the part of Prince Danilo in *The Merry Widow*"), the author, Beverley Baxter, wrote:

The golden dream of Fascism is fading. Establishing iron discipline in a chaotic Italy was a fascinating task. Restoring the ruins of ancient Rome, eliminating everything that meant nothing, and building a new Forum to restore the glory of the Caesars: all this meant feeling history pulsing through one's veins.

But, after sixteen years, to find that the coffers are empty, exports have all but dried up, and—worst of all—to be a slave to his German imitator in Berlin! No wonder that when the people shout, "Duce, Duce, Duce," he looks at them almost with pity and then quickly disappears. If we could read his thoughts, I believe they would be something like this:

"If Hitler goes to war and we join him, Italy will be crushed in six months. Look at the coasts I have to defend against the British and French fleets, with Turkey ready to pounce.

England will close the Suez Canal and arm the Abyssinians. The army I have there will be cut off and massacred. In Libya, too, my army will be destroyed. And even if there were a chance of winning, my people do not want war.

What if I abandoned Hitler and joined the democracies? Germany is at the Brenner Pass. In its fury, it would launch a terrible attack against Italy, and would Great Britain and France rush to our rescue? The whole world would stand by and watch the dictators cut each other's throats.

And what if we remained neutral? At the end of the war, we would be prisoners of the victors, whoever they may be: both the victors and the vanquished would be repulsed by us"...

Behind the scenes, in chancelleries and embassies, among key figures and foreign policy officials, the "Pact of Steel" made less of an impression and elicited more muted reactions. In the West,2 in fact, most had long taken it for granted, and there was an awareness that, in the broader context, it brought very little that was new and that, all things considered—even if it was wise not to harbor illusions—its formalization might even have some positive aspects. Significant in this regard is the position of the new British ambassador to Rome, Loraine. On May 9, immediately after the announcement of the impending conclusion of the alliance, he

2 In his Memoirs, D. Grandi wrote: "And England? The news of the Italian-German alliance saddened the British, but did not move them excessively. For some, it was nothing more than confirmation of a situation that already existed in practice. Others—and they were numerous—did not consider it a definitive position for Italy."

had sent a telegram to Halifax that is worth reading in its entirety[3]:

It is too early to accurately assess the implications of the Italian-German political and military alliance initially agreed upon at the meeting in Milan between Count Ciano and Mr. von Ribbentrop.

2. The official Italian position is expressed in Gayda's article from last night, which was

undoubtedly inspired. The attempt to shift the blame onto the democracies is elaborate and specious. The assertion that the alliance is a factor contributing to peace in Europe is hardly convincing, even though I have no doubt that the Italians would love to believe it to be so; the acknowledgment that the policy of blocs has been adopted is unintentionally frank; the foreshadowing of new tensions is not reassuring.

3. It is perhaps a pity that I was unable to see Mr. Mussolini before this step was taken, but the Minister of Foreign Affairs told me that it would not have been proper for me to see him before presenting my credentials. I do not claim that I could have changed his mind—which presumably had already been made up—but perhaps I could have gained a firsthand impression of the lines of thought he was formulating in his mind.

4. Given these circumstances, I can only assume that his action is consistent with his alleged disregard for the alleged objectors at the last meeting of the Fascist Grand Council who were opposed to overly close relations with Germany, on the grounds that even if Italy had not yet derived benefits from the Axis, it would obtain them in due course and certainly could not secure them by any other means.

5. It seems very likely that pressure to conclude the alliance came from the German side and that it was very strong; one may suppose that negotiations for a non-aggression pact such as that between the United Kingdom, France, and Russia, combined with the anticipated conclusion of an Anglo-Turkish agreement to the same effect, provided Mr. von Ribbentrop with powerful arguments in urging the Italian government to conclude the alliance.

6. We can assume, I think, that Italy sought some compensation for the virtually complete surrender of its freedom of action. It may be that my telegram No. 444 provides a clue to this. There is no doubt that, although the Italians would obey Mr. Mussolini's orders, Italy's participation in a war in support of Germany's claims on Poland would be deeply unpopular in that country.

7. Judging by the very cordial personal reception I received, by the evident popularity of the British show-jumping team at the Rome Horse Show that concluded yesterday (and the equally evident unpopularity of the German team), and by other indications—which I admit are merely straws in the wind, though they confirm the impressions gained here by the Prime Minister and by yourself— there is great cordiality and respect here for the United Kingdom and a strong desire, as far as we are concerned, to put the past behind us. However, I cannot shake the impression that behind the cordiality of the ruling circles lies the hope for future favors, particularly to satisfy Italy's claims at France's expense.

8. And I cannot help but fear that behind the cries for peace and justice lies a heartfelt ambition for further colonial expansion and control over sources of raw materials.

9. In reality, the situation created by a formal alliance will differ more in form than in substance from the one that preceded it.

io. Mr. Mussolini may have thought he had no alternative but to yield to German pressure. But what was his predominant consideration in bringing upon himself, by acting in this way, such unpopularity? Was it the prevailing alarm over the rapidly growing military strength of the anti-aggression front? Or was it primarily a spirit of defiance and determination to fight for what he had been unable to secure by more peaceful means? Time will perhaps solve this enigma.

11. As far as we are concerned, may I suggest that we remain absolutely calm in the face of this new but not entirely unexpected development? This will suffice for the time being, whether Italy's motives are alarm or defiance.

12. My French colleague believes that the key to understanding the significance of the alliance will be Germany's attitude toward Poland from now on, and he expects this to become clear within the next two weeks. I do not disagree with him.

Fourteen days later, with the alliance signed and more information available, his assessment had become more precise, but in essence it had not become more negative; if anything, it was, at most, more "positive," at least hypothetically. Here is what Loraine telegraphed, again to Halifax, on May 23:[4]

I have been told—though I have no way of verifying the information—that when Count Ciano met with Mr. von Ribbentrop in Como on May 9, the latter announced that German troops would enter Danzig forty-eight hours later; that Count Ciano telephoned Mussolini, who protested strongly and said that the respective rights and obligations of the Axis partners must henceforth be precisely defined. Hence the Treaty of Alliance.

2. I infer that the above is fairly accurate because it agrees with other information, namely:

a) Italy's reluctance to be dragged into a war over a German-Polish dispute;

b) the rumor circulating here that the initial suggestion for an alliance came from the Italian side;

c) the intense pressure Italy is exerting to induce Poland to make peace with Germany and to agree in principle to Hitler's proposals;

d) Hitler's decision to leave his issues with Poland unresolved for two months.

3. After carefully reading the published text of the alliance treaty and Gayda's article on it in yesterday's *Giornale d'Italia*, one cannot help but be struck by the extent to which Italy has aligned itself with Germany in both politics and military affairs. The treaty obligates each party to provide full military assistance even in a war that we would consider an act of aggression.

4. My impression is that Count Ciano and his personal allies are striving to indissolubly bind Italy's fate to Germany's and believe in a "blitzkrieg" and in the ability of Germany and Italy to wage it successfully; that Mr. Mussolini would still like to leave the door open for reconciliation with the democracies, but feels rebuffed; that informed Italian public opinion

will resign itself, albeit reluctantly, to the policy of "sink or swim" with Germany unless a welcome reconciliation with the democracies takes place very soon—for which they expect the democracies to pay a price.

5. At the same time, I cannot believe that Mussolini intends to bind his country to the German chariot as completely as the treaty suggests, and what follows is my hypothesis and its rationale.

6. Roughly speaking, he has earned the right to be consulted by Hitler, and the price paid is the

alliance. On four occasions, we have reason to believe, Hitler acted without any semblance of actual consultation with his Axis partner; and Mussolini had to take it or leave it. It was impossible for Mussolini to break the Axis, because it was vague. It is possible for Mussolini to break the alliance if Germany does not honor it. Here, moreover, lies the possible explanation for Mussolini's extreme sensitivity to any foreign hint that the Axis might be broken and was weakening.

7. Taking Mussolini's recent statements that Italy needs peace at face value—as, in a certain sense, we can reasonably do—the alliance places him in a stronger position to restrain Hitler from moves that would drag Italy into an unwelcome and unpopular war. And Italy has secured Germany's full support should it launch another coup.

8. On the whole, I am inclined to believe that the alliance is preferable to the Axis. The situation is more positive: the alliance must be accepted as a powerful factor, whether we like it or not. It may, quite conceivably, lead to German action that offends even Italian sensibilities and patience. It may ultimately—and if the precarious state of European non-war can be preserved for some time—give us and the French a concrete bargaining chip, because the Axis powers have now united their policies and ambitions. The alliance may prove less elusive than the Axis. (

9. But even if we have the right to harbor these faint hopes, and decide, in light of all this, to persevere in our attempts to avoid a rupture with Italy and to keep an outstretched hand that it may grasp, we cannot turn a blind eye to more threatening factors, namely: the Duce's conviction that the Italian-German alliance alone is capable of bringing benefits to Italy; Gayda's emphasis on the predatory nature of the coming war waged by the have-nots against the haves; Italy's gradual succumbing—which seems inevitable—to political vassalage and economic subordination to Germany.

As far as our discussion is concerned, what matters most is what the British ambassador said in the last three points of his telegram. The "Pact of Steel" might perhaps put Mussolini in a position to rein in Hitler more effectively than before and provide the Anglo-French with a concrete point of reference for possible negotiations. If this was believed to be possible, it was wise to avoid a rift with him and, indeed, to show a willingness to extend a hand to him—while, however, always keeping two things firmly in mind: that the alliance also enabled Mussolini to attempt some other move along the lines of the Albanian campaign, and that, in any case, the "Duce" wanted to derive concrete benefit from his position, whether it was that of a pure and simple ally of Hitler or that of an intermediary for general negotiations. Loraine was not alone in this assessment; the U.S. ambassador to Rome, Phillips, for example, was also convinced that Mussolini was "so eager to avoid war that we might hope," he wrote to Washington, "for his influence on Hitler to be exerted through the Permanent Consultative Commission."[5] And it was precisely along these lines that Chamberlain and the Foreign Office acted—with truly remarkable realism and unscrupulousness—throughout the entire period between the announcement of the "Pact of Steel" and the final crisis that led to the outbreak of war.

We will not delve here into the long-standing question of whether Chamberlain had initially considered the possibility of redirecting Nazi aggression toward the East and letting the USSR bear the brunt of it; what is certain is that by this time, if he had ever truly entertained such a plan, it had by then been abandoned by London. Under French pressure, by mid-April the British—now convinced that Hitler could not be restrained except by force and ready even to go to war to prevent him from launching further aggressive moves—had turned toward an agreement with Moscow that would secure Soviet aid for Poland and encircle Germany from the east, thereby also safeguarding the other countries of Eastern Europe. By May, negotiations were already at an advanced stage, even though we now know that Moscow was simultaneously looking toward Berlin as well (the replacement of Litvinov with Molotov

as head of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs on May 3 marked a watershed moment in this regard), so much so that in August, faced with Polish and Romanian opposition to potentially granting Soviet troops passage through their territories, Stalin and Molotov decided to abandon negotiations with London and Paris and instead sign a non-aggression pact with Berlin—all the more so because the Germans were willing to sign, along with the pact, a secret protocol delineating their respective spheres of influence and assigning to the Soviet sphere Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland east of the Narew-Vistula-San line to the Soviet sphere of influence and recognized the USSR's "interest" in Bessarabia. From this perspective, London's sole objective was increasingly to buy time to complete its diplomatic, military, and economic preparations for the conflict with Germany—or, in the best-case scenario, to test, not with the compromising attitude of the previous year but with firmness, to test Hitler's true intentions and see whether he was truly determined to unleash war or whether an agreement could still be reached with him that—without harming Poland—would allow the Anglo-French powers not only to save the peace but also to strengthen themselves further and weaken Hitler's prestige (which was entirely based on the threat of his military might) over the smaller European powers.

In London, the conviction that the "Pact of Steel" could serve as a factor for peace was even weaker than that held by Loraine in Rome. Nevertheless, since it was widely believed that Mussolini did not want a conflict and was seeking to act as a mediator between Berlin and Warsaw[6] and that he likely felt uncomfortable in the role of Hitler's ally—a role he had chosen, at least in part, out of necessity and in the hope of controlling and keeping Germany in check—it was considered even more advisable than in the past not to break with him and, indeed, to encourage him in his intentions. But all this was to be done without making absolutely any concessions to him. According to the Foreign Office's extremely unscrupulous view, if any "move" were to be made to encourage Mussolini, it should be made, if at all, by the French, since it was from them that Mussolini expected to gain advantages and from them that he was awaiting them. Halifax had already taken, as we have mentioned, a first, albeit tentative, step in this direction in Paris on May 20—before learning the text of the "Pact of Steel" and before the Danzig issue escalated—during his meeting with Daladier. The British account of the conversations between the two statesmen reads[7]:

He [Halifax] believed… that when Daladier spoke of making concessions [and refused them], his thinking went beyond that of Lord Halifax. His view of the matter was as follows: from many quarters —private individuals, industrialists, Lord Perth, and Sir P. Loraine—he had received information indicating that the Italian government was not happy with the military alliance with Germany and would have wished, had it been possible, to secure a position in which it would have greater freedom of maneuver. He could not help but think that, as far as the fundamental question of peace or war was concerned, it would be wise not to overlook the potential value of using Italian influence in favor of peace against German influence in favor of war. The Italian government was concerned with having something to show its own people in order to strengthen Mussolini's domestic position. Italy wanted to achieve something without war, but, in the worst-case scenario, pressure from Mussolini could lead to a reckless act that might result in conflict. Lord Halifax believed that the matter should be handled in such a way as not to expose France to the risk of making concessions it should not grant, while at the same time saving Mussolini's face... He thought, with all due respect, that it should not be impossible for the French government to tell the Italian government that the latter had certain claims that the

6 News from the Holy See lent considerable weight to this view; since the end of April, the Holy See had been engaged in intense diplomatic efforts to avert the danger of war and was in close contact with Mussolini, who, at least initially, was considered by the Vatican to be the linchpin of the operation. See C. F. Delzell, "Pius XII, Italy, and the Outbreak of War," in *Dialoghi del XX*, no. 8, 1969, pp. 186 ff.

The French were ready to negotiate. Certain matters could have been agreed upon and others not, but the French were willing to talk, convinced that Italy, too, would make a contribution.

Consistent with this approach to relations with Rome,[8] London did not denounce the "Easter Agreements" after the signing of the "Pact of Steel," even though it kept Mussolini on a tight leash, waiting until June 8 to clarify its position on the matter, despite the "Duce" showing clear signs of impatience to learn it. Then, on July 5, Chamberlain wrote a rather vague letter to Mussolini in which he merely stated that he was willing to accept a peaceful resolution to the Danzig crisis, but which was intended to urge—without actually asking him to do so—the "Duce" to exert pressure on Hitler to persuade him to renounce his demands, and in the days that followed, he acted much more decisively than Halifax had in May to convince Daladier to begin negotiations with Rome, insisting that even if the initiative did not prompt Mussolini to influence the Germans, it would nevertheless serve to buy England and France precious time and demonstrate to the world their desire for peace. Although the British ambassador, in delivering the letter Chamberlain had written to him for this purpose, pointed out that "the question of war or peace" likely depended on the negotiations, Daladier did not feel able to accede to the request. As he replied to the British prime minister on July 24, he stated that he was convinced that only an uncompromising stance could save the peace and that any move by France would be interpreted by Mussolini as a sign of weakness; he reiterated that, in any case, any negotiations with Italy would have to be conducted in the spirit of the January 1935 agreements. With this effort having failed, the Foreign Office's stance toward Rome remained one of complete passivity until well into August, aside from repeating at every opportunity that England and France would stand by Poland to the bitter end. This was all the more so because, on the one hand, the fascist press's attacks on Paris and London's "race" toward an alliance with Moscow and reports of Rome's pressure on Madrid to induce it to conclude an alliance with Italy certainly did not lead to a change of mind regarding Mussolini's intentions; and, on the other hand, Chamberlain's inner circle harbored some hope that Grandi's entry into the Italian government might have a positive influence on the "Duce."9

9 The hopes placed in Grandi were based essentially on two facts: his clear awareness that England had by then decided to go to war if necessary to stop Hitler, and his conviction

If these were essentially the repercussions of the "Pact of Steel" on British and French policy, before resuming our examination of Mussolini's moves, it is necessary to briefly mention the far more significant repercussions that the alliance with Italy had on German policy. As we saw in the previous chapter, throughout the entire phase of courting Italy, the Germans had consistently agreed with Mussolini that a conflict with the Anglo-French powers should not be considered for quite some time—not only because the "Duce" would otherwise have refused to sign the alliance, but also because, they said, they too still needed time to complete their military preparations, especially in the naval sphere. In Milan, according to the Italian minutes drafted by Ciano—and there is no reason to doubt their reliability—von Ribbentrop had expressed his conviction that a period of peace lasting four to five years was necessary. The German minutes mention only three years during which conflict was to be avoided, "if possible," but they clearly state that, in response to this Italian request, "the Reich Foreign Minister informed Count Ciano that Italy's position coincided with the German point of view." In this context, German claims to Danzig and the so-called Polish Corridor—necessary to ensure contiguity between the Baltic city and the Reich—had seemed to Ciano to be matters that were neither immediate nor irreconcilable,0 leading him to state that, while Italy was not interested in them, it was nevertheless "ready to act as a mediator should Germany so desire." Well, on May 23, 1939—the very day after the signing of the "Pact of Steel" in Berlin—Hitler announced in a top-secret meeting with Germany's highest-ranking military leaders that Danzig was "by no means the cause of the dispute" with Poland

("For us, it is a matter of expanding our living space to the East and securing food supplies, as well as resolving the issue of the Baltic States") and declared himself determined to press ahead, "at the first opportunity," with action against Poland itself, even though he was convinced that "we must not expect a repeat of the Czech affair. There will be war." It is true that in setting forth this decision, he added that, from this perspective, the task of German diplomacy was to isolate Poland—a fact he had made no secret of to Halifax, even after news of the conclusion of the "Pact of Steel"—that "Italy's destiny is to become, in wartime, an enemy of the nations with which it was allied in peacetime" and his hope that he himself might be the one to "sign a second London Pact." D. Grandi, Diary Excerpts, July 1, 1939, in the D. Grandi Archive, b. i;i, file 199, subfile 3. This attitude was so well known that *Je suis partout* (see P. M. Dioudonnat, *Je suis partout 1930–1944. Les maurrassiens devant la tentation fasciste, Paris 1973), the well-known pro-Nazi Parisian newspaper, had gone so far as to report in May (almost certainly at Germany's instigation) on the existence in Italy of a monarchist party—of which Grandi was said to be the leading figure—that was plotting against Mussolini.

Poland, and that there was not to be a "simultaneous conflict with the West"; however, two of his subsequent statements, as recorded in the minutes of the meeting on the 11th, strip these words of much of their significance—or, rather, give them an essentially optimal meaning, indicating what would have been the best way to carry out the operation and nothing more. The first was: "The conflict with Poland —to be initiated with an attack on Poland—will be successful only if the Western Powers are kept out of it. If that is impossible, then it would be better to strike at the West and deal with Poland at the same time." And the second: "An alliance of France, England, and Russia against us would prompt Germany, Italy, and Japan to attack England and France with a few devastating blows." Such a decision (which, moreover, was to be kept secret "from both Italy and Japan") clearly demonstrates that the Germans—while not wishing for it, seeking to avoid it, and above all harboring the conviction that England and France would back down at the decisive moment and abandon Poland to its fate —did not rule out a general conflict at all, one that would unfold much sooner than what had been agreed upon with Mussolini and Ciano; nor were they willing—as events would amply demonstrate—to wait for "the first suitable opportunity," but, on the contrary, were determined to bring it about themselves as soon as possible. The evident "bad faith" of Germany's conduct toward Italy—if one may use this term in a historical context when referring to such events—demonstrates, in turn, the decisive importance that Hitler must have attributed, in terms of the feasibility of his plans, to the conclusion of the alliance with Mussolini. It was clear to Hitler that the Italian army was ill-suited for a modern, large-scale war and that Italy, for this reason and because of its economic weakness, would not be a very active ally. What mattered to him, however, was being certain that Italy would not side with his adversaries, which already ensured that he would not have to defend the southern front and that, for better or worse, Italy would draw upon itself a not insignificant portion of French and British forces. He believed this fact would further dissuade Paris and London from entering the war and, in any case, would relieve the German army of the burden of those forces,12 allowing it to successfully carry out the "blitzkrieg" upon which his entire strategy—not only militarily but also politically and economically—was based.13 Nor should another aspect of the issue be underestimated. A few months later, on the eve of the start of operations against Poland, Hitler, speaking to a group of his generals, reportedly said that Italy's loyalty to the alliance was tied to Mussolini's survival and added: "The fundamental attitude of the Italian court is against the Duce" 14. In our view, this statement must be seen as one of the most important reasons for his decision, as soon as the alliance was signed, to rush the timing of the action against Poland: allowing time to pass would have been risky for him, as there was no guarantee—and, indeed, everything suggested the opposite—that the alliance would survive a possible premature death of Mussolini or his removal from power by the monarchy and other forces hostile to the alliance itself. Based on the available documentation, it is more difficult to say whether Hitler also considered the possibility that Mussolini, if matters had dragged on, might—under pressure from circles hostile to

Germany and Anglo-French enticements—somehow break away from the alliance. His admiration for the “Duce” and his “sense of honor” likely prevented him from considering such a possibility. We would not, however, entirely rule out the possibility that others in his inner circle might have considered this and were therefore inclined to see an opportunity to take advantage of a moment that was, all things considered, psychologically more favorable—and that for this reason they did not try to dissuade Hitler from risking a general conflict before Germany was at the peak of its preparedness.

12 And in fact, even though Italy did not immediately enter the war as he would have wished, Hitler would not have failed to acknowledge—even in private—the military advantages that Italy’s “non-belligerence” had indirectly provided him. Significant (just as it is significant that Mussolini kept it among the documents he considered most valuable) is what R. Bova Scoppa reportedly told Anfuso from Lisbon on May 8, 1941: “Baroness von Rheibaben, wife of a former Reich Secretary of State, repeated in confidence to Gerbore a statement made in private by the Führer to her mother, who—having been among the first ‘contributors’ to the National Socialist movement—now enjoys his friendship.

From a strictly Italian perspective and in terms of Mussolini’s political biography, the period between the Ciano–Ribbentrop meeting in Milan on April 6–7 and the outbreak of World War II—along with Italy’s declaration of “non-belligerence”—can be divided into three sub-periods: the first up to Ciano’s meetings with von Ribbentrop and Hitler on August 11–13; the second up to August 25, when Mussolini informed Hitler that Italy would not enter the war for the time being; and, finally, the third up to September 3, when England and France declared war on Germany, thus leading to the failure of Mussolini’s mediation attempts.

“During the days of the British offensive in Cyrenaica, the First Lady had uttered a few words that the Führer must have interpreted as criticism or as unfavorable to us, because, interrupting her, he exclaimed with great vehemence: ‘Germany must never forget what it owes to Italy and to Mussolini. It is thanks to them that we were able to militarize the Rhineland, annex Austria, and liquidate Czechoslovakia. Italy tied down the French divisions in the Alps, allowing us to defeat France, and today it bears the brunt of the British fleet. I would spend my very last resource to support and defend Italy and Mussolini”» (ACS, B. Mussolini, Valigia, B. 3, Appendix II).

For Mussolini, the first of these sub-periods represented, in many respects, the last true moment of relative détente and grand projects in his life. Having made the decision and convinced that, thanks to it, the danger of a conflict was now past and that he therefore had at least three or four years of peace ahead of him to reap its benefits—and having shed the despondency and tension that had plagued him since mid-March— on the one hand, his attention returned to domestic and longer-term issues—primarily the economy, the younger generations, and the “character” of Italians—and on the other hand, as had happened before, his regained confidence led him to entertain a whole series of new projects or ones that the gravity of the moment had caused him to set aside. Typical of this latter point is the violent resurgence of his intentions to do away with the monarchy, as evidenced by Ciano’s diary[15] and easily explained when one considers the king’s behavior on the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Fasci di combattimento, his overt hostility toward the occupation of Albania, and his recurring anti-German outbursts, which made it clear just how difficult the alliance had been for him and that he had accepted it only as the lesser of two evils—a necessary expedient at that moment, but a temporary one. As for the new projects, we will mention only the most significant and important ones: the plan to “make Yugoslavia and Greece pay” sooner or later, the former for distancing itself from

Italy and Germany after the fall of Stojadinović (which marked the beginning of a new phase in relations with the Croats with a view to “shattering” Yugoslavia and creating a Kingdom of Croatia allied with Italy), the latter because the government in Athens had not trusted Italian assurances and had instead accepted the British guarantee;[16] and to work toward extending the “Pact of Steel” to Hungary, Spain, and Japan, and to secure a Bulgarian stance in favor of Germany and Italy ’7.

However enticing these plans may have been (and those concerning the strategy that Germany and Italy were to adopt when the time for action came—which, as we shall see, he would outline to Hitler in the so-called “Cavallero memorandum”) did not, however, cause Mussolini to lose sight of the international reality of the moment—and in particular what he and Ciano considered the fundamental prospects of the new situation for Italy resulting from the Milan meeting and the announcement of the “Pact of Steel.” Although he was convinced that his decision had marked a clarifying and easing turning point in the European situation, there were in fact many problems on the table.

With Germany, the primary issue was defining the precise terms—the text of the pact agreed upon in Milan.[18] The fact that its drafting was left to the Germans and that Italian input was minimal and modest—even though Ciano himself, upon receiving the text, had remarked, “I have never read a pact like this: it is pure dynamite”[19]—was at the center of controversy and heated accusations of Ciano’s incompetence. There is certainly a good deal of truth to these accusations; however, a genuine historical understanding of the event must not, in our view, lose sight of one thing: namely, that after the Germans had assured them that they, too, did not want a general war for at least three to four years, what mattered most to Mussolini and Ciano was that the text of the treaty clearly enshrine the principle of permanent and preventive consultation. Having secured this, everything else seemed secondary in their eyes and, ultimately, such that insisting on it too much became, for them, “undignified,” even though, in reality, the value of the consultation obligation enshrined in Articles 1 and 2 was, in the text drafted by the Wilhelmstrasse, deprived of much of its effectiveness by the provisions of the ambiguous Article 3—namely, by the automatic link it established between a state of war in which one of the two parties found itself and the intervention of the other. It is significant in this regard that not even Attolico —who did point out to Ciano certain points in the text drafted by the Germans that would be well advised to amend and who conducted the relevant negotiations—dwelt on the ambiguity and risks inherent in Article 320. Confirmation of what we are saying seems to lie in the so-called “Cavallero memorandum,” in the note that Mussolini, as mentioned, had delivered to Hitler in early June, in which he summarized what the “Pact of Steel” was in his eyes and how it was supposed to function.[21] The note was essentially divided into three parts. The first,

18 After the signing of the “Pact of Steel,” on June 23, 1939, Italian-German operational meetings began to resolve the issue of the non-Italian-speaking minority in South Tyrol. For the entire affair, see R. de Felice, *Il problema dell’Alto Adige*, op. cit., pp. 33 ff.

21 Mussolini also sent a copy of the note to Victor Emmanuel III; see ACS, Private Secretariat of the Duce, Confidential Correspondence (1922–1943), “W/R, file ‘Solmi A.,’” dated July 11, 1939.

It was very brief, reiterating the premise of the alliance itself: “War between the plutocratic—and therefore selfishly conservative—nations and the populous and poor nations is inevitable.” The consequences set forth in the second and third parts stemmed from this premise. The second part reproduced verbatim the central section of the memo that Mussolini had drafted for Ciano on the eve of the Milan meeting and which Ciano had then handed over to his German counterpart. Such insistence clearly demonstrates how much the “Duce” was committed, even after the signing of the alliance, to reaffirming his determination to avoid a European conflict at all costs for at least three to four years.

The third part consisted of a series of political and strategic considerations and guidelines regarding the nature of the war between the Western powers and the two Axis powers, and how the latter should approach it. Particularly significant—both from the general perspective of how Mussolini envisioned the conflict and in light of the events of the following months—are, in our view, those remarks concerning the "attrition" nature the war would take on, and those that stemmed directly from them: namely, that it would therefore be absolutely necessary "from the very first hours of the war… to seize the entire Danube and Balkan regions," to swiftly neutralize Greece, Romania, and Turkey, and to secure their military, food, and industrial supplies; and those stating that in the West the war would be essentially an air and naval conflict, since it was foreseeable that along the Rhine, in the Alps, and in Libya it would take on the character of "mutual defense." It is also significant that the note practically took the conclusion of the Anglo-French-Soviet agreement for granted, did not seem to attach particular importance to it, and, indeed, appeared to regard it as a "positive" development due to the opportunities it would offer for Italian-German action plans aimed at "undermining the internal unity" of France and England, accelerating "the moral decay" and to "incite revolt" among their colonial populations.

As for the stance toward France and England, these same weeks essentially constituted a period of waiting: with regard to France, to see if Paris would finally decide to enter into genuine negotiations over Tunis, Djibouti, and the Suez Canal; as for England, to see whether Chamberlain would react to the "Pact of Steel" as Mussolini expected—that is, by resorting to his mediation and good offices with Hitler and fostering a rapprochement with Paris—or, on the contrary, whether he would denounce the "Easter Agreements" and deem it impossible to collaborate with him; a decision, however, that Mussolini—convinced as he was that the British prime minister was absolutely determined to reach an agreement with Germany—was certain London would not make. Thus, at first, the British silence must not have troubled him too much, even if it undoubtedly unnerved and worried him at times. The attitude of the press—now increasingly orchestrated on a daily basis by the Ministry of Popular Culture based on instructions from Palazzo Chigi and Palazzo Venezia—was characteristic of this dual state of anticipation: polemical and, at times, even aggressive toward England (with considerable space devoted to denouncing the Conservative government's "pro-Sovietism"), even after, on June 8, London had made it known that it continued to consider the "Easter Agreements" valid and in effect, but had then fallen into an "inexplicable" and "absurd" silence; more cautious toward France, careful not to unnecessarily offend its sensibilities or provoke a "resurgence of hostilities" after the anti-Italian wave sparked by the events of late 1938 and early 1939 had subsided and while it seemed that the anti-Italian front was beginning to disintegrate.[22] The same attitude, moreover, that—on closer inspection—Ciano and Mussolini adopted in their relations with Loraine on the one hand and François-Poncet on the other,[23] which the "Duce" had, so to speak, already inaugurated during the interval of the alliance—between its announcement and its signing—with the speech he delivered in Turin on May 14, and which found, on the British side, its perhaps most significant moment in Grandi's withdrawal from London in early July and the fact that he was not replaced for several months. There is little to say about the Turin speech. Like the one at the Foro Mussolini less than two months earlier, it was formal in tone and largely devoted to extolling the "indissoluble community of the two states and the two peoples" enshrined in Milan, but in substance entirely aimed at reaffirming Italy's desire for peace and urging the "great democracies" to demonstrate "an equally sincere desire for peace," to abandon the policy of "guarantees" and "guns pointed" at Italy, and, in conclusion, to implicitly urge them to request mediation with Hitler.[24] This latter appeal was one that, in early May—before the "thaw" in Milan—Mussolini had believed he could bring about by declaring his agreement with the Holy See's plan to convene, through him specifically, a conference to discuss the European crisis and the related problems among the various powers, in which England, France, Poland, Germany, and Italy. A month later, concerned by the British silence, he had to try to provoke a response by suddenly proposing to Father Tacchi Venturi (who, on behalf of Cardinal Maglione, Secretary of State to Pius XII, had gone to

ask him to use his “great influence” over Hitler so that “the Danzig question might be handled with the calm that the current delicate international situation makes more necessary than ever”) that the imminent outbreak of a conflict was “absolutely certain”—at a time when both he and Ciano were, in fact, convinced that no such risk existed; so much so that a few days later (when Loraine had finally reported that London continued to consider the “Easter Agreements” in force, and Mussolini’s apprehensions must therefore have subsided for the time being) Ciano reportedly told the nuncio that there was no danger of war for six months “since Germany has no intention of attacking Poland... and within six months, matters can be settled in such a way as to ensure peace for years to come.” This was, if you will, an assurance, but certainly also a new form of indirect pressure on the Holy See to urge London, Paris, and Warsaw to make use of Italy’s good offices. And this was all the more so because fifteen days later, again with Monsignor Borgongini-Duca, Ciano would go so far as to make a statement that is hard to believe was dictated solely by a sense of security and a desire to extol his own policy: “in any case, Germany

22 Significant in this regard are the instructions given by D. Alfieri in his June 13 report to the representatives of the major newspapers. See ACS, Agenzia Stefani, Manlio Morgagni, b. 12, file 12.

23 During this period—and more precisely in June—P. Reynaud conducted an inquiry, almost certainly of an entirely personal nature, aimed at ascertaining Mussolini’s true intentions toward France. The intermediary for this inquiry was Marcello Soleri, who was in Paris on business and who, upon returning to Italy, informed Bocchini; however, a few days later, Bocchini let him know that Mussolini did not wish to receive any communications other than through normal diplomatic channels. See M. Soleri, Memorie, Turin 1949, pp. 220 ff.

24 The Turin speech (see Mussolini, XXIX, pp. 272 ff.) is significant not only for understanding the “Duce’s” political strategy but also for assessing public attitudes toward Fascist foreign policy and the concerns this policy aroused in Mussolini. The crowd listening to the speech applauded warmly at the passages speaking of peace; by contrast, there was very little applause for those referring to the alliance with Germany and to Tunis (the “gun pointed at Italy’s side”). This greatly irritated Mussolini, who ordered the chief of staff of the Ministry of Popular Culture, C. Luciano, to shift the applause in newspaper reports and in the soundtracks of LUCE documentaries from the former passages to the latter. See C. Luciano, Report to the Duce, Rome 1948, pp. 12 ff.

As an example of popular hostility toward the alliance with Germany during this period, consider the following excerpt from an intelligence report dated June 10, 1939, by a party informant (ACS, PNF, Political Situation in the Provinces, “Grosseto”): “The alliance with Germany is yet another source of speculation for the defeatists, who present the event from the least favorable perspectives and in an arbitrary and alarmist manner. These particular situations deserve the full attention of all competent authorities because cracks are already beginning to appear, the origins of which must be investigated with great care and patience if we are to safeguard the moral resilience of the Italian people. Certainly, the idea of a war with France does not find much understanding, even while acknowledging the validity of Italy’s claims. Indeed, it can be said that our people almost instinctively refuse to consider a conflict between the two countries as possible. This is the widespread opinion throughout the countryside and cities of Veneto and Tuscany. The state of mind of these populations is therefore far from being prepared for any eventuality: the emergence of currents that tend to portray the possibility of a war against France as an act of Fascist madness could be dangerous for the moral resilience of the people should Italy be dragged into a conflict against its will for peace.

“The Duce’s visit to Piedmont was interpreted in many circles in Veneto as an expression of the Duce’s

desire to reassure the border populations, but even on this occasion many tendentious rumors were spread with the aim of causing alarm, which demonstrates the existence of defeatist currents whose activities deserve to be monitored with special attention."

"He will not act without our consent, and neither I nor Mussolini want war."[25] Grandi's recall from London must also be viewed within this climate of anticipation and attempts to urge London and Paris to open negotiations. A recall that, as we know, Mussolini had decided upon and announced to Grandi as early as the second half of February, but which he carried out only now—and through such a strange procedure that it raises the gravest doubts as to whether he intended it solely to "dislodge" and punish the "gray, murky, and treacherous Grandi," to give half-hearted satisfaction to the Germans, who were demanding his head as an opponent of the Axis, and to put an end to the recurring journalistic "rumors"—especially French ones—about his dissidence, which were inspired by the Germans and the French for opposing yet converging purposes." So much so that the most likely explanation is that Mussolini's desire to put pressure on the British—thereby expressing his irritation and, at the same time, his "disinterest" in their silence—contributed (and to a decisive extent) to the implementation of the February decision. This is all the more true given that Grandi's appointment as Minister of Justice to replace Solmi (on July 12) and, following the death of Costanzo Ciano, also as President of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations (on November 30) can hardly be explained solely by a desire not to give the Germans too much satisfaction and to refute rumors about Grandi's alleged dissidence (for which less prestigious posts, such as a transfer to another first-class embassy, would have sufficed) and suggests rather a desire to counterbalance the negative "message" to the British inherent in Grandi's recall and his non-replacement (Bastianini would have been accredited only after the outbreak of the war) with another "message," this time a positive one: the man of friendship and

26 See G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 254 and 256; D. Grandi, *Memorie*, op. cit. Before being recalled from London, Grandi had been forced by Ciano, on Mussolini's orders, to deliver a speech on May 25 at the embassy praising the "Pact of Steel" (see, on the entire affair, D. Grandi Archive, b. 56, file 153; as well as its reception at the time of his recall in "Un discours," in *Je suis partout*, July 14, 1939), which, in his memoirs, he says he delivered in the hope of thus being able to remain ambassador in London—and which was understood by most British government officials precisely in this spirit. This explanation is confirmed by the warmth and sympathy with which Grandi was greeted by nearly all British political and journalistic circles at the time of his official recall. Particularly significant is what W. Churchill wrote to him on October 26, 1939: "It has been a real sorrow to me that the events, against which you and I have both fought, have cast a shadow over a period of your memorable mission in this country.

"I am glad that the prospects for an Anglo-Italian understanding are now better, and you may rest assured that I will continue to work toward this end. I have firm confidence that we will be victorious in this war, which we are determined to pursue at all costs until Europe is free from the German threat; and I am convinced that it will not last as long as it did last time.

"In any case, whether it is long or short, we will not give up" (D. Grandi Archive, b. 64, file 157, subfile 2).

The architect of the agreement with England always enjoyed the "Duce's" trust and, indeed, was one of his principal collaborators.

In other times, under less deteriorated international conditions, this game of overtures and indirect "messages" might perhaps have yielded some results for Mussolini in the long run—or, at the very

least, afforded him the opportunity to make a series of policy adjustments that would allow him to continue maneuvering between London, Paris, and Berlin. In the new situation brought about by the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and—as far as Italy was most directly concerned—by the alliance with Germany, every passing day, however, further reduced Mussolini's room for maneuver. And not only with regard to the Anglo-French, but also to the Germans.

Upon receiving the "Cavallero memorandum," Hitler had declared himself "generally in full agreement" with it, but had also indicated that he would nevertheless be pleased to meet with Mussolini "in the summer" at the Brenner Pass, "especially regarding some of the points set forth" in it. The proposal was met with silence in Rome. A week after forwarding it, Attolico had pressed for a response, but to no avail; after a few more days had passed, Ciano finally decided to give a reply, but it was extremely bland and evasive: the idea was "most welcome" to the "Duce," who left it up to the Führer to put it into practice.[27] Then nothing more. Nor should this come as a surprise: faced with the silence from Paris and London, Mussolini preferred to avoid a meeting in which he would have had virtually no opportunity to propose anything and would only have found himself in a difficult position.

With the start of the third decade of June, however, the outlook began to darken once again, and the first alarming reports from Attolico began to reach Rome: the Danzig issue seemed to be escalating, even though the Germans tended to downplay the dangers. Faced with this news, on July 2, Ciano instructed Attolico to request "information" from von Ribbentrop. The tone of the instructions was firm: "Naturally, we do not shy away from any eventuality—not even the most serious ones—[but] we wish to know in a timely manner how things stand so that we may take the necessary measures, both military and moral."29 Just how much the deteriorating situation in Danzig actually worried Mussolini is demonstrated by the fact that the very next day—even before learning von Ribbentrop's response—Mussolini prepared for Ciano (who, on the other hand, was far less alarmed*) a proposal for a plebiscite in the Baltic city, to be organized and supervised by an international committee composed of representatives from Germany, Poland, England, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and France.[31] Three days later, Attolico spoke with von Ribbentrop. The "extremely urgent personal" telegram in which he reported the conversation to Ciano the following day was not dramatic, but certainly not such as to justify optimism either. The German minister had extolled German power and expressed his conviction that France and England would not take action—nor would the USSR or the U.S.—and that, consequently, Poland would not take action either. Hitler, moreover, did not want a general conflict. But when pressed by Attolico to clarify how the Germans assessed the prospect of a conflict "believed to be local or containable" that could escalate into a general war, he had responded in such vague terms that the ambassador—while stating that he believed "for the moment, there is nothing to fear"—suggested to Ciano that it would be advisable to follow up on Hitler's proposal from a month earlier—now repeated to him by von Ribbentrop—for a meeting between the two dictators on August 4.[32] Nevertheless, and although a whole series of alarming reports were arriving in those very days from England, France, Poland, and the Vatican, Ciano once again chose to drop the proposal. Upon receiving the report, he informed Attolico that it would be better to postpone the meeting until late September, "unless compelling reasons" warranted bringing it forward. And with that, he left for Spain to meet with Franco.

In reality, the "compelling reasons" certainly existed—and how. So much so that, two days after receiving Ciano's reply, on July 11, Attolico hastened to write to Anfuso that, according to the information he had been able to gather, a series of German troop movements was underway that was expected to conclude by August 15, and that "it is in August, in fact around the 10th–15th of the month, that the Führer will decide on peace or war," and that therefore the meeting was not only necessary but urgent. And two days later, he pressed for a response on this matter, also on behalf of von Ribbentrop.[34]

To understand the isolation in which Palazzo Chigi tended to keep Mussolini, it is highly significant that Anfuso did not immediately show the letter to Mussolini, but instead briefly informed Ciano in Spain, asking him for instructions before bringing it to the "Duce's" attention—and this despite the fact that other alarming reports continued to arrive from the embassy in Berlin. Thus, in practice, Attolico was only able to inform Hitler of the acceptance of the proposal on July 15. Nor did the matter end there. Upon returning to Rome, Ciano—evidently regarding Attolico as an alarmist—summoned Magistrati from Berlin to Rome for consultations and did everything in his power to derail the meeting. Here is how Magistrati recalled his meeting on July 21 with his brother-in-law[35]:

I found him… somewhat concerned about the turn of events and about the initiative regarding the Hitler-Mussolini meeting, which he essentially disapproved of. In reality, he was already in a frame of mind opposed to military adventures. But, at that moment, he still believed that the entire crisis would likely lead to a new European compromise without escalating into open conflict and would, in essence, leave the framework of the Italian-German alliance intact. He told me, therefore, first and foremost, that he saw no need for the planned meeting, either within the general context of international relations or within the specific context of relations between Rome and Berlin. "Within the framework of an alliance," he added, "in which relations between the two allies are carefully considered, this upcoming meeting at the Brenner Pass could be interpreted either as an act intended to precipitate events in Europe or as a sign of some disagreement between the two allies themselves"... All things considered, at the end of July, he, too, was among those—and there were many—who still considered it absurd and unwise on the part of the Germans to want to force the issue to its extreme consequences. He therefore regarded as exaggerated and premature the initial fears, already repeatedly—though not yet decisively—voiced by Attolico regarding the true intentions of the German leaders.

Perhaps out of a greater sense of the gravity of the situation or simply out of a desire to seize the opportunity to revive his role as a mediator, it was Mussolini who, after a very brief moment of uncertainty, was most receptive to the idea of meeting with Hitler. Magistrati, who met with him the day after his meeting with Ciano, found him clearly leaning toward a pacifist stance and "inclined to once again assume the role of moderator and, perhaps, mediator," even though he was concerned about playing into the hands of the Anglo-French.

As Magistrati wrote in the book in which he recounted the conversation,[36] Mussolini was plagued by doubts regarding the appropriateness and wisdom of weakening—through an attitude of immediate and overt distancing from what appeared to be Germany's intransigent tactics—the international position established by the Italian-German alliance. It was, in fact, evident that, in all likelihood, such a weakening would have strengthened the position and argument of the other bloc; and this was something Mussolini—who still felt a bitter aftertaste from the failure of his attempts to pressure France—absolutely did not want. His effort, therefore, in preparing for his meeting with Hitler, was precisely aimed at "launching" a formula capable of substantially preserving peace, while at the same time keeping alive the very young alliance between the two countries.

Such an effort struck me as constant and evident throughout the time he stood at his desk in Palazzo Venezia, issuing the instructions I was to take to Berlin.

As telegraphed that very day to Attolico, the gist of these instructions was that he wanted "to give the upcoming Brenner conference a substantive content of the greatest international significance, while simultaneously reaffirming the indissoluble Italian-German friendship." Specifically, the mission to Berlin was to proceed along three lines. First: "to state first and foremost, clearly and without room for misunderstanding, that if the Führer believes the time is truly ripe today for war, Italy is prepared to

consent to it one hundred percent. Should Germany be compelled to mobilize, Italy will do the same simultaneously, intending to fully honor its commitments with all its might." Second: to point out that the information available to Rome gave "serious reason to believe" that in the event of an action "against Danzig or in Danzig," not only Poland but also France and England would intervene; to reiterate what the Germans already knew from the "Cavallero memorandum," adding to what was written therein that Ciano had returned from his trip to Spain convinced of another "extremely important" fact—namely, that in the event of a conflict, France would not go beyond benevolent neutrality—and therefore inviting the Germans to "consider whether the immediate outbreak of war is advisable" or whether it would be better to wait for a more opportune moment, when there would be a greater "possibility of a surprise." Third: in this situation, consider instead "the possibility of Berlin and Rome employing a means to undermine the united front of the governments and public opinion in the democratic countries." That is, to launch, on the occasion of the Brenner meeting, "an initiative for a conference that would be presented as capable of discussing and resolving current European problems. This would automatically bring Germany's and Italy's "desired outcomes" to the table."

The nature of such a conference would have to be strictly European, so that, it is reiterated, decisions could be made solely on strictly European issues—that is, those concerning relations among the major European powers. This would exclude Russia, given that it is an intercontinental power, as well as the United States and Japan. Only Germany, Italy, France, Great Britain, Poland (given its direct interest in those issues), and—to clearly counterbalance Poland itself—Spain would thus gather around the table; Spain would thereby undoubtedly be placed among the major Western European powers.

If, however—and this is a possibility—there were a desire to have a neutral European observer at the Conference, representing, in a certain sense, the smaller countries, one might consider, for example, Switzerland, the Netherlands, or Sweden.

And this is bearing in mind that, should the conference take place, "Germany and Italy, closely united and confident in their actions, would have a high probability of success," and if it were rejected, "the responsibility for future events would fall entirely on the shoulders of the governments of France and England"—a fact that could not fail to have serious repercussions within those countries.[37]

It is difficult to say to what extent Mussolini believed in the success of his proposal and to what extent, on the other hand, he merely wanted to buy time and make his actions appear to originate in London and Paris. Probably, as was often the case with him, he believed both and hoped that one thing would lead to another. It is equally—and perhaps even more—difficult to determine how much weight to give to the first of the three statements, the one in which he recommended making it abundantly clear to the Germans that he was determined to stand with them one hundred percent, even in the event of war. There is no doubt that instinctively he wanted to honor the alliance; however, we would be less certain in asserting that he was rationally determined to do so even if Hitler were to unleash the war without a "real" necessity and in violation of all the commitments made to him. For the time being, however, the need for a decision did not arise. Mussolini's proposal met with the approval of neither von Ribbentrop nor Hitler; yet it must have had some effect. If nothing else, it must have raised in them the first doubts about the actual possibility of counting on Italy to the very end. It would otherwise be difficult to explain why, after having requested the meeting and still considering it appropriate even after learning of the "Duce's" proposal (on July 26), they preferred, a few days later (on July 31), to drop the idea of an immediate meeting at the Brenner Pass and requested a postponement "for a week or ten days"; nor why von Ribbentrop hastened to tell Attolico that Hitler was "in complete agreement with the Duce in considering it advisable to avoid, for the time being, —according to the viewpoint expressed in the Cavallero document—a European conflagration" and that he would "certainly avoid anything that

might (within Danzig itself) lead to adverse outcomes, provided that he does not have absolute certainty—that is, 100/100—that he can isolate Poland”38. Although it is certain that Hitler did not want a general conflict and that he was led to it primarily by a misjudgment of the actual Anglo-French stance—and after the agreement with the USSR had further confirmed him in this view— it is possible to believe that Hitler deliberately canceled the Brenner meeting so as not to give Mussolini the opportunity to further clarify his position and to gain time to define his own course of action first, so that, if necessary, he could present Mussolini with a fait accompli at the last moment and prevent him, in the meantime, from giving further substance to his idea of a European conference which, had it come to fruition, might have enabled him to acquire Danzig, but would have prevented him for some time from taking action against Poland.

For a few days, the results achieved through the Attolico initiative created a more relaxed atmosphere at Palazzo Chigi, thanks to which Ciano strengthened his conviction (also based on the reports sent to him by Magistrati) that the situation was not as grave as the ambassador in Berlin had assessed it and continued to assess it, going so far as to in a telegram dated August 1, to speak once again of the possibility of immediate war and thus to insist that it was now up to the Italians to seek a clarifying meeting.

“From the reply given yesterday and telegraphed by me,” Attolico stated in his telegram No. 39, “one should infer that the Führer has not yet, in his heart, decided between peace and war. He could never truly decide—strictly speaking, in terms of logic and treaty—without Italy.”

In any case, what does the delay of a few days that he has requested mean?

There are two possibilities. The Führer might—having burned all his bridges, ruled out any possibility of accommodation or compromise, and already put together a war machine that will be ready to strike in just two weeks—might, in the absence of any other visible alternatives, feel inevitably more and more inclined toward war. Or else the Führer—brought back to reality by the Duce’s communications —has asked for time to reexamine the situation in light of those communications, in the hope, or at least with the intention, of trying to align himself with his ally’s views. Certainly, the idea of a conference—given that his mind was not working in the same direction or on the same level as that of the Duce—must have caused him wonder and surprise from the outset. For him, it represented a fundamental change in policy, and thus one that could not be accepted without resistance and from one moment to the next. But the fact that he asked for time to think it over and reflect on it may also be a good sign...

Nevertheless, it seems to me that—given the current state of affairs—if the Führer were to insist on a meeting, it would mean that, as far as he is concerned, he has decided to go to war.

In this case, refusing the meeting or continuing to postpone it would effectively amount to giving Germany complete freedom of action until it accepts a fait accompli that could also implicate us. On the other hand, by meeting with the Führer and discussing matters with him while his ideas are still taking shape and his decisions are not yet final, we would have the opportunity—which, given the Duce’s authority, would become a certainty—to influence his decisions and win him over to our side.

We must, therefore, now watch the situation closely. I say “closely” because I do not know whether it would be prudent to wait indefinitely for the Führer’s decisions.

I humbly believe that if, within a week, nothing new is communicated to us, it might be in our best

interest to take the initiative. The date of August 15 is approaching. One can never know what might happen when the going gets tough. In the Third Reich, sudden and lightning-fast decisions are nothing new. Italy, on the other hand, has every interest in making it clearly known that, for its part, it cannot and will not accept under any circumstances being "taken by surprise."

But Attolico was not the only one being "alarmist." During those same days, the military attaché in Berlin, Roatta, was also sending dispatches that were anything but optimistic; combined with what was known about the decision by Warsaw, London, and Paris not to yield to a new Nazi coup, these reports could not fail to give Ciano pause for thought in the long run. Thus, between August 6 and 7, the idea of a Ciano-Ribbentrop meeting took shape, intended to take stock of the situation and, if necessary, prepare for a subsequent Mussolini-Hitler meeting.[40] According to Ciano's diary, the idea came from the Italian foreign minister. Mussolini immediately welcomed it with great enthusiasm. "A war now would be madness," he told his son-in-law on August 9, and the next day, as Ciano was preparing to leave for Germany, he spoke to him in very clear terms.

The Duce—Ciano noted[41]—is more convinced than ever of the need to delay the conflict. He personally drafted an outline of a communiqué on the Salzburg conference that concludes with a reference to international negotiations to resolve the issues that are so dangerously disrupting European life.

Before taking his leave, he again urged me to make it clear to the Germans that conflict with Poland must be avoided, since it is now impossible to contain it and a general war would be disastrous for everyone. Never before has the Duce spoken so passionately and unreservedly about the need for peace. I agree with him one hundred percent, and this conviction will lead me to redouble my efforts. But I have my doubts about the results.

The evening before Ciano's departure, Attolico had telegraphed that, despite the gravity of the situation, "the question of the definitive choice of the path to follow remains 'open.' One cannot help but recognize, however, that the prospects for a peaceful solution are tending to diminish rather than increase."42 Contrary to Attolico's belief, the talks that Ciano held from August 1 to 13 in Salzburg and Berchtesgaden with von Ribbentrop and Hitler demonstrated, on the contrary, that the path was no longer "open." The former, in the grip of "an unreasonable, obstinate determination to bring about this conflict," declared himself convinced that the situation was "particularly favorable for Germany to act" against Poland. The conflict would not escalate, because "Europe will stand by impassively as Poland is mercilessly crushed." And even if France and England had wished to intervene, they would have found themselves "in the practical impossibility of inflicting harm on Germany and the Axis, and the conflict would certainly end with the victory of the totalitarian powers." As for the USSR, it too would not have intervened because negotiations with the Anglo-French had failed and talks with Germany were now underway. Against the wall of this certainty, all of Ciano's arguments crumbled irretrievably.[43] Nor did things go any better with Hitler.[44] He, too, declared himself certain that the conflict would remain localized. Against this certainty, Ciano's arguments and his reference to the agreements reached to avoid war for two or three years proved even more ineffective than they had been with von Ribbentrop. As Ciano wrote in his account of the meeting,45 shortly after he began speaking, he was interrupted by the Führer, who told him that what he was saying was absolutely true and that he, too, agreed with Mussolini in believing that two or three years—but no more—would be useful for the Axis to improve its position and its preparations. He would wait for them, as had been agreed. But Poland's provocations and the worsening of the situation have made German action urgent. This action, however, will not provoke a general conflict. The Führer is therefore certain that, as far as Italy is concerned, he will not have to request assistance in accordance with the existing commitment.

And in the subsequent conversation, when Ciano again raised the possibility that the conflict might escalate into a general war, he cut him off, telling him that if this “absurd” hypothesis were to occur, it would mean that England and France “had by then decided to fight the Axis and that, even without the German attack on Poland, they would not have allowed those years of preparation—which might have seemed useful to Italy and Germany—to pass”46.

The talks in Salzburg and Berchtesgaden marked the end of Mussolini’s and Ciano’s illusions and, with them, the failure of their entire policy. The regime—and with it, Italy—found itself faced with a choice that Mussolini had never before had to confront and that would almost certainly prove decisive for both.

Ciano, who, moreover, had felt deeply hurt by the cold and aloof manner in which von Ribbentrop had treated him—so different from what he was accustomed to—returned to Rome determined to do everything possible to keep Italy out of the now imminent conflict.

“I return to Rome,” he wrote in his diary,[47] “disgusted with Germany, its leaders, and their conduct. They have deceived and lied to us. And today they are about to drag us into an adventure we did not want and that could jeopardize the Regime and the country.” The Italian people will shudder with horror when they learn of the aggression against Poland and, if necessary, will take up arms against the Germans. I do not know whether to wish Italy a victory or a German defeat. In any case, given Germany’s conduct, I believe we have a free hand and propose that we act accordingly—that is, by declaring that we do not intend to participate in a conflict that we neither wanted nor provoked.

His colleagues at Palazzo Chigi shared his view, and as soon as the outcome of the talks began to become known (Ciano made no secret to anyone of what he had learned and of his reactions), the vast majority of the Fascist leadership would also come to hold the same opinion. Indeed, it should be emphasized that, precisely around the issue of what stance to take regarding the war, in the two weeks following Ciano’s return to Rome, a profound reshuffling and realignment took place within that leadership group—affecting the various subgroups that had previously constituted it and the personal relationships among its members. Old grudges, such as those between Balbo and De Bono, came to an end and were transformed—through their joint efforts to keep Italy out of the conflict—into renewed friendships; others, such as those between Ciano and Grandi, were put on hold and, in any case, subsided somewhat. Relationships that had previously been somewhat uncertain and ambiguous—such as those between Ciano and Bottai—took on a new and distinctly more positive character. Others, however, clearly entered a crisis, such as, for example, those between Ciano and Starace and between Bocchini and Starace. Some of these developments had already been underway for some time, but it was the new situation that brought them to full fruition. It was this new situation—and the firm stance Ciano immediately adopted in response to it—that led many who had until then been critical and hostile toward the young foreign minister (in March, when the Grand Council was debating for the umpteenth time who should, in the event of Mussolini’s incapacitation or death, take the reins of the regime—the issue had been set aside because, with most leaning toward a triumvirate, it had been easy to agree on the names of Balbo and Grandi, while Ciano’s name had met with the strongest opposition[48]), a change of opinion toward him and, consequently, a strengthening of his position as the regime’s number two (just as among supporters of intervention alongside Germany, a deep hostility toward him that would never subside, not even after June 10, 1940)—all of which help explain the further rise, in the following months, of his political fortunes and power, which would reach their zenith by the end of October (for toward the end of the following year, as we shall see in the next volume, they began to decline rapidly as the negative aspects of his personality increasingly came to

the fore) with the replacement of Starace by Muti as secretary-general of the PNF and the government reshuffle that gave rise to what was commonly called the “Ciano cabinet,” precisely because of the decisive role the foreign minister played in selecting which ministers to replace and appoint.

But as significant as the broad coalition that immediately formed in favor of Italian non-intervention in the war may have been (at the top of the regime, those in favor of intervention were, at the outset—though most later aligned themselves with Mussolini’s position—practically only Starace, Farinacci, Alfieri, Buffarini-Guidi, and Pariani), and the fact that the Foreign Minister was leading it, the decisive factor in the situation was Mussolini. Everyone was aware of this, Ciano foremost among them. And not only the Italians, but also all the foreign representatives in the capital—who, having been more or less immediately informed of the rift that had developed within the Axis following Ciano’s trip to Germany—were anxiously following developments in Italian politics and trying to gather as much information as possible on Mussolini’s intentions.[49] It was clear that the “Duce” did not want war at that moment and knew he was utterly unprepared for it. This, however, did not resolve the issue. A whole series of other motivations—political, ideological, cultural, personal, and related to prestige—in fact prevented the “Duce” from easily resigning himself to the idea of reneging on his signature under the “Pact of Steel,” of having to contradict the words he had spoken at the “Campo di Maggio,” of being forced to acknowledge the failure of his own policy and the unpreparedness of the “mighty” Italian army, and of ultimately deserting the “test” for which he had “prepared the generations of the fasces.” Grandi, whom Ciano sought out and wanted by his side upon his return to Rome to help and advise him during those dramatic circumstances, has accurately reconstructed in his memoirs what Mussolini’s state of mind must have been during the two weeks that elapsed, roughly speaking, between his son-in-law’s return and the outbreak of war:50

Mussolini did not want war at that moment. He loved to “play” with war; he had always made such claims—in speeches to the crowds, in newspaper columns, and in colorful, bloodless military magazines. He had taken Nietzsche the wrong way and, for many years, had posed as a philosopher and prophet of war, shouting, threatening, and putting on a “ferocious face.” It was a “bluff,” a deception into which he himself had ultimately fallen, a victim of the sound of his own words—which he often mistook for the heavy, ominous rumble of tanks on the march or the roar of airplanes in flight. All the more so because others had believed him and, often, yielded to him. He had waged war, too. He had waged two: the Abyssinian War and the Spanish Civil War. But neither had been a “great” war, and for that reason alone they had allowed him to appear “great.” A European war was a war of giants, fatally destined to restore the true proportions—not the illusory ones. Mussolini understood this perfectly, and Hitler’s unexpected announcement—the brutal nonchalance with which he suddenly reneged on the solemn commitments he had personally made to him, the adulated and extolled mentor—confirmed it to him.

On the other hand, how could he—Mussolini—have suddenly appeared before his people and the entire world as having been “betrayed” by his loyal friend and the loyal German people, or worse still, as a “traitor” himself, at the very last hour, to a solemnly sworn pledge of solidarity? The fateful words he had spoken that September in the May Field before the intoxicating crowd in Berlin surely rang in his ears: “When I have a friend, I stand by him to the very end.” How could he—the reckless prophet of war, the recognized Pontiff of a universal ideology—back down just as the anticipated war was arriving and the conquering ideology was finally setting out to conquer the world? How could he, the Duce “who is always right,” present himself to the Italians as a petty statesman who had made a mistake, and take refuge—as the modest A. Salandra had already done in July 1914—behind the mediocre formula of “sacred egoism” defended by neutrality?

Nor, if we broaden the discussion for a moment to encompass the entire period between Ciano's return from Germany and the announcement of Italy's "non-belligerence," should we underestimate how much—given his character—the reports, in some cases true but very often fabricated out of thin air, circulated by the international press (and the French press in particular) regarding his doubts, his conflicts with Hitler, with the monarch, and within the regime, the violent popular reactions to the prospect of a war alongside Germany, and so on. A wealth of reports on which one could dwell for pages and which, having already begun to circulate before Ciano's meetings with Hitler and von Ribbentrop, became increasingly abundant afterward and, as we said, increasingly fanciful. While the reports regarding disagreements with the Germans (immediately fueled by the fact that no communiqué was issued after Ciano's trip, since no wording had been found to satisfy both parties, but the Germans tended to present it as having taken place in the spirit of the most perfect unity of views), were well-founded, others—invented out of thin air abroad or gleaned from those circulating in Italy—were not at all. Suffice it to say that rumors even circulated about a quarrel between Mussolini and Badoglio that ended with the former being wounded in the face and hospitalized, a duel with Marshal Caviglia (who would later commit suicide), an assassination attempt—again against Mussolini—orchestrated by Badoglio and Count Calvi di Bergolo, the king's abdication, and full-blown popular uprisings.51

In his diary, Ciano is quite sparing with details regarding how Mussolini reacted to the account of the meetings with Hitler and von Ribbentrop that Ciano gave him on August 13, shortly after returning to Rome by plane[52]:

At Palazzo Venezia, I reported to the Duce. And in addition to the account of what had happened, I fully revealed to him my assessment of the situation, the men involved, and the events... The Duce's reactions were varied. At first, he agreed with me. Then he said that honor compelled him to side with Germany. Finally, he stated that he wanted his share of the spoils in Croatia and Dalmatia.

And his subsequent notes on the matter are also brief and vague, more often highlighting his mood swings and the most glaring uncertainties than attempting any analysis—even a purely human one. Nor is this, ultimately, surprising: Ciano's diary entries from these weeks, in fact, give the distinct impression of aiming above all to highlight his author's personal contribution to the "Duce's" decision not to intervene in the war—and to do so in a way that, essentially, on the one hand, overestimates—whether knowingly or unknowingly, it is difficult to say —such a contribution and, on the other, underestimates or glosses over Mussolini's initiative, sometimes going so far as to omit certain important facts or to distort others. All things considered, even if largely based on indirect information, the overall picture of these reactions provided by Grandi in his memoirs seems more reliable to us, especially since it is corroborated in various ways by the memoirs, diaries, and documents of other figures in the regime. Grandi writes:[53]

Mussolini showed no reaction to Ciano's detailed report on the Salzburg meeting: the blow had been too harsh, and he had withdrawn into absolute silence. Impenetrable and alone at Palazzo Venezia, he refused contact with anyone, limiting himself to receiving only those closest to him. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Undersecretary of the Interior, the Party Secretary, the military undersecretaries, and the Chief of Police. He would speak with them for only a few minutes and then retreat once more into silence and solitude, like a sphinx.

Again according to Grandi[54], rather than making a decision, Mussolini effectively ended up letting others "act on his behalf, while pretending not to notice." On this point, however, we disagree with Grandi, who likely formed this view through the lens of his close contacts with Ciano during this period. Undoubtedly, Ciano's account was a devastating blow to Mussolini. Ultimately, however, it was

probably less of a blow than the meetings with Hitler—and especially with von Ribbentrop—had been for his son-in-law: partly due to his fear and atavistic distrust of the Germans, and partly due to his greater political acumen, he must, deep down, have expected it; just as it would have been the case with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, which took Ciano completely by surprise (even though he should have had ample reason to anticipate it,[55] certainly more than the "Duce" had), but less so for Mussolini.[56] And certainly, even though he was deeply shaken by the news brought by Ciano, even though he withdrew into himself, and even though he experienced, as usual, mood swings and outbursts—sometimes directed at the Germans, sometimes at the Anglo-French who "had put him in that situation"—Mussolini was by no means passive or as indecisive as is often claimed. Too many facts, gleaned from the various available sources, prove that his decision-making role was not only active but also, in terms of timing, ahead of Ciano's suggestions and proposals, which justifies our disagreement with Grandi's assertions. Among the most important, we wish to highlight two. The order given on August 16 to De Bono (though, note, Mussolini had summoned him as early as the 14th; it was De Bono who, being in Cassano, could not reach him sooner) to immediately conduct a reconnaissance "on the northern front, from the Resia Pass to Tarvisio" ("These are the most important; complete them within the month")[57]; and the summons, on August 19 (that is, the day before Ciano "convinced" him, as we shall see, to authorize him to speak once more with von Ribbentrop "with complete frankness and assert our rights as partners"[58]), of Giacomo Paulucci di Calboli Barone to ask him to prepare a written report ("it will be the first document in a dossier I am preparing on the betrayals of Comrade Hitler") regarding a conversation he had had in Berlin on June 22 with Reich Minister of Economics Funk, during which the latter had spoken about Poland's natural resources in a way that suggested the Germans intended to seize them, a fact that

56 See G. Bottai, Diario, op. cit., f. 698, dated August 31, 1939, where it is recorded that, in response to Bottai's question as to whether Rome had been aware of the negotiations that had led to the German-Soviet Pact, Ciano replied: "No. The Duce says yes. But the information we had was vague, up in the air. Attolico had told us, off the record, that something was in the works. But without going into detail."

58 Paulucci's relevant notes from August 19 and 21—the days on which he received the summons in Venice and was received by Mussolini, respectively—were published by F. Milesi Ferretti, *L'attività diplomatica di Giacomo Paulucci di Calboli Barone*, master's thesis in modern history, Rome, Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, 1970–71, pp. 179 ff.

Paulucci had reported this to him, but at the time he had not believed it.[59] In reality, many of Mussolini's "uncertainties" during those days likely concerned not so much the fundamental decision not to participate in a conflict as the manner and timing of its implementation in a situation that remained, to some extent, uncertain and in which there was no shortage of unexpected twists—in particular, the announcement of the German-Soviet Pact—that could have led one to expect a different outcome. What, in fact, must have concerned Mussolini above all was taking a pointless or premature step that, by revealing his decision too soon, would completely ruin his relations with Germany or deprive him of the chance to attempt, at the very last moment, to exercise his role as mediator. This, let it be clear, does not mean denying or even underestimating the fact that the decision not to enter the war weighed heavily on him and was felt by him as a political, ideological, and moral defeat; and that, therefore, even while knowing it was necessary, he simultaneously rebelled against it, hoped to avoid it, and even, at certain moments, rejected it. For where Grandi was correct was not in the passage from the memoirs cited above, but in an entry in his diary, where, under the date of August 21, he wrote that Mussolini was "fighting the greatest inner battle of his life." And he fought it essentially all on his own, minimizing contact with all his collaborators—even Ciano—and making the actual decisions himself, even though he outwardly led them, and especially his son-in-law, to believe they played a significant

role. Perhaps without even realizing it, perhaps out of deep weariness and detachment from such petty vanities, perhaps out of calculation—so that he could eventually turn them against them and, if necessary, shift the blame onto them. In essence, it can be said that Mussolini, while absolutely unwilling to reveal his hand or jeopardize any opportunities the situation might offer him, and wishing —if he absolutely had to—to issue a declaration of neutrality—a word so distasteful and demeaning to him that, when he had to use it, he replaced it with the more martial term "non-belligerence"— — he made his decision rationally immediately after hearing Ciano's report. This likely occurred on the night of August 13–14. The best evidence lies in the order he issued the following day summoning De Bono and in the instructions he gave him on the 16th, as soon as he was able to speak with him. Further confirmation—though undoubtedly less significant—is provided by the instructions to newspaper editors and the director of the Stefani News Agency issued by Alfieri in his report of August 18, which correspond to those that, as we know from Grandi's diary entries,[60] had been given on the 16th by Starace—certainly not on his own initiative—to the federal officials: "Pull back, with all your might, from the popular propaganda campaign in favor of Germany"[61]:

"I have already instructed you," Alfieri said, "to avoid excessive optimism regarding Poland and to generally support the idea of a Polish-German agreement. I have summoned you here today because I believe it is useful, through personal contact, to clarify our position more effectively than is possible in a circular."

Supporting Germany on the Danzig issue does not mean exaggerating—as some have done—in the polemical framing of the issue itself. We can and must demonstrate the legitimacy and justice of the German position, but it is not advisable to take too decisive a stance, given that the situation—which is very serious and delicate—is currently evolving, and we do not know precisely what may happen.

If Poland recognizes that it is in its best interest to reach an agreement with Germany, so much the better for everyone; but, in the meantime, let us avoid committing ourselves too far. In this regard, it is also worth bearing in mind that, while continuing to argue with England and France, we should not overreact, precisely because the situation remains uncertain.

The uncertainties and second thoughts of the following days that Ciano mentions in his diary were, rather than genuine second thoughts, essentially moods typical of his character (and one might even wonder how sincere they were and to what extent they were partly for show and partly to rein in his son-in-law and prevent him from rushing things with the Germans)—and these became, it is worth noting, —less frequent and eventually subsided entirely as news from the British and the unfolding of events demonstrated to him just how "disloyal" the Germans' attitude toward him was, to the point of convincing him that he had been deceived and betrayed by them. Some of Ciano's notes are significant in this regard.[62] At only one point were his uncertainties rational: at the time of the German-Soviet pact, when—though he rebelled against the idea that Hitler could have struck such a close agreement with Stalin in defiance of the logic of the Anti-Comintern Pact and, once again, of what had been agreed upon—for two or three days, he had to ask himself whether it constituted a new development capable of bringing about an actual change in the situation. But Ciano, too, harbored the same uncertainties, as evidenced by his notes dated August 22.[63] After that, however, Mussolini returned to his previous position, with the added bonus of a new cause for controversy with the Germans.

Specifically, the documentation available today allows us to reconstruct Mussolini's "uncertainties" in the days following Ciano's return from Germany in these terms. On August 14, the "Duce" prepared a draft communication to be sent to the Germans in which he emphasized two points: that the certainty of localizing the conflict was unfounded, and that the dispute with Poland could "still be subject to a

solution that Germany has the right to expect, without resorting to force" M. Ciano's diary entry for the following day65 tells us what significance should be attributed to this document:

The Duce, who at first refused to separate his freedom of action from that of Germany, has now—after reviewing the documents I presented and following our discussions—come to realize that it is impossible to march blindly alongside Germany. He does, however, have one reservation: he wants to prepare for disengagement, but to do so in a way that does not abruptly sever relations with Berlin. For, in his view, it is still possible—albeit difficult—that the democracies might back down. In that case, it would not be in our interest to have clashed with Germany, since we, too, must claim our share of the spoils. We must therefore find a solution that allows us: a) if the democracies attack, to disengage "honorably" from the Germans; b) if the democracies hold their ground, to seize the opportunity to settle accounts with Belgrade once and for all.

To this end, it seems more advantageous than anything else to set the conclusions of Salzburg down in writing. It is a document that, depending on the circumstances, we can either bring out or leave buried in the archives. But even the Duce is increasingly convinced that the democracies will fight: "It is useless," he says, "to go up to two thousand meters among the clouds. Perhaps one is closer to the Eternal Father—if He exists—but one is farther from mankind. This time it is war. And we cannot wage it because our circumstances do not allow it."

On August 16, it was decided not to send the written note after all, but to convey the message only verbally, "since a written note might prompt Germany to ask for clarification regarding our possible stance in the event of war." Two days later, in the middle of the night, Attolico informed Ciano that von Ribbentrop had telephoned him, asking to see him the next day and telling him to inform Rome "that the decisions in the direction already communicated [to Ciano] at Berchtesgaden had now been made."67 At the meeting on the 19th, Attolico conveyed Mussolini's position to the Nazi minister, who, however, clearly showed that he did not take it seriously and, on the contrary, sought to argue that, through the talks of August 11–13, Germany had fulfilled its consultation obligations and that, consequently, Italy had no choice but to fulfill its own obligations to intervene on Germany's side in the now imminent conflict.[68] The next day, Attolico was in Rome and met directly with Mussolini, as Ciano was in Albania. After the meeting, the "Duce" called a meeting for 7:30 p.m. with several ministers (who had already been summoned to Rome for that day as early as the 17th), the military undersecretaries, and Starace.[69] On the same day, an event occurred that undoubtedly weighed heavily on the subsequent meeting at Palazzo Venezia: namely, the delivery by the British ambassador of a communication from Halifax to Mussolini, in which it was reiterated that England and France would not shirk their commitments to Poland, and it was stated that London was not, however, opposed to a negotiated solution to the Danzig question: if a conference were proposed for this purpose "by an authoritative party," in which Poland and the USSR would also participate, the British government, while skeptical about its outcome, would view it favorably70. Despite its cautious and circuitous wording, this communication demonstrated that, perhaps, there was still some possibility of avoiding conflict and, above all, that Mussolini could still attempt to revive his idea of an ad hoc conference. This was all the more so because the day before, not only had Loraine tried to meet with Grandi, but Grandi had also been contacted by A. Dingli, who had arrived in Rome to reactivate the "secret channel" and to convey a personal message from Chamberlain (the content of which, however, we do not know)[71]. All of these developments might have led one to believe that, following Salzburg and, perhaps, also as a result of a move on August 15 (we do not know whether made on his own initiative or at Ciano's suggestion) by Attolico regarding his British counterpart in Berlin, Henderson—aimed at urging Italian-British cooperation to safeguard peace[72]—the government in London was shifting its position toward Italy.

We are poorly informed about the events of the second half of this day—which was highly significant for the entire course of these two weeks. We do not even know with certainty whether the meeting called by Mussolini took place. Ciano, who had returned promptly from Albania on Anfuso's advice, makes no mention of it and speaks only of a meeting

68 Ibid., pp. 68 ff. On the same day, Attolico had a second meeting with von Ribbentrop; for details, see ibid., pp. 73 and 78 ff.

between himself, Mussolini, and Attolico, which, if anything, must have preceded the one with the ministers and undersecretaries. But his account of it contradicts the only reliable document we have on the matter. According to Ciano, Mussolini reportedly declared himself in favor of an intervention alongside the Germans and wanted to reassure them of this. In the end, however, the meeting reportedly ended in a stalemate.[73] Only the following day, pressed by his son-in-law, did Mussolini reportedly agree to allow him to meet with von Ribbentrop once more to speak to him "with complete frankness" and to "assert our rights as partners," without, however, breaking up the Axis "for the time being."[74] Bastianini mentions a meeting between Mussolini and Ciano at which he was reportedly present for some time, but his account reveals a sort of confusion—or overlapping—of memories regarding this meeting and the one held on the following August 26.[75] Finally, Luciolli offers a version that seems the least improbable; that is, he speaks of a single meeting—the one convened by Mussolini for 7:30 p.m., without Attolico—from which the decision for the new Ciano-Ribbentrop meeting emerged. 7\ The only thing certain is that Mussolini and Ciano[77] prepared a draft note to be sent to the Germans (dated 7:00 p.m.) in which a) they confirmed their conviction that the conflict could not be localized and, to support this, attached a copy of the communication delivered by P. Loraine a few hours earlier; b) they reiterated that Italy's conditions were not "at that moment" "the most favorable" for dealing with it; c) it was stated that "the British suggestion" should not be dismissed: provided that Danzig was first returned to the Reich, Germany had "nothing to fear" from an international conference that might address the "further definition of relations between Germany and Poland," the "Franco-Italian problems," the "German colonial question," "economic problems and the redistribution of raw materials," and "arms limitation." As can be seen, the content of this document contradicts what Ciano stated in his diary. However, it ties in well with what we know about the events of the following August 21, 78: a) the preparation, by L. Vitetti with Attolico's assistance, of the documentation necessary for Ciano to demonstrate Italy's legitimate right not to consider itself automatically committed to entering the war and to advocate instead for the proposal to convene a conference that would examine all the major European issues at hand; h) its review by Mussolini, who "slightly" modified it to prevent it from being interpreted as a denunciation of the alliance; c) the drafting, again by Mussolini, of a letter to Hitler that Ciano was to carry with him, in which the "Duce" outlined four possible scenarios: "i) If Germany attacks Poland and the conflict remains localized, we will provide Germany with the support it requests; 2) If Poland and the Allies attack Germany, we will intervene on Germany's behalf; 3) If Germany attacks Poland and France and England counterattack Germany, we will not undertake any military operations, given the current state of our military preparedness, which has been promptly communicated to the Führer and von Ribbentrop; 4) If any negotiations fail due to the intransigence of others and Germany intends to resolve the dispute by force of arms, we will intervene alongside Germany"; d) the telephone call from von Ribbentrop to arrange Ciano's meeting with him.

77 DDI, vol. VII, XIII, p. 83. The editorial note attributing the document not only to Mussolini and Ciano but also to Attolico is evidently drawn from Ciano's Diary, while the reason for the reference to the "Chronology of the Main Events Preceding the Outbreak of the War," drafted by the offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is unclear, given that this document does not mention Attolico's name

among the meeting participants (ibid., p. 398).

As can be seen, Mussolini wanted to proceed with caution—unlike Ciano, who would have preferred to rush things and no longer believed in the possibility of an agreement—but the true meaning of his letter to Hitler is clear: the “Duce” wanted to lay the groundwork for remaining outside the conflict, without, however, breaking ties with Germany and still hoping to position himself as a mediator. The German-Soviet Pact, however, momentarily disrupted his plans but ultimately reinforced his resolve shortly thereafter. When von Ribbentrop was reached by telephone, he first took a few hours to respond, then let it be known that he was about to leave for Moscow to sign a pact with the Soviet government. This news—as has been noted—plunged Mussolini and Ciano into confusion and uncertainty, leading them to put aside the idea of a meeting with von Ribbentrop and, for a moment, to once again entertain more “rosy” plans. Suffice it to say that Pariani was tasked with studying a possible course of action against Yugoslavia and Greece.[79] However, two or three days—during which it became clear that the pact would not change the stance of London and Paris—were enough to bring them back to a more realistic view of the situation. This was all the more so because, during those same days, the thaw in relations with England made great strides, and London began maintaining close contact with Rome, keeping it promptly informed of the negotiations with Germany—negotiations about which Berlin, on the other hand, maintained the utmost secrecy and even downplayed their significance. This fact, combined with the attitude of Victor Emmanuel III—who was clearly hostile to any idea of entering the war and determined not to be sidelined from the relevant decisions, starting with that of a possible general mobilization—played no small part in persuading Mussolini to accept Ciano’s view that it was now appropriate to let Hitler know that, should a general conflict initiated by Germany break out, Italy would not take part in it. On the morning of August 25, a new telegram was therefore drafted for Attolico, instructing him to inform the Führer that if the conflict remained localized, Italy would provide Germany with “any form of political and economic aid that might be requested,” whereas in the event of a general war provoked by a German attack on Poland, Italy—"given the current state of our military preparedness, which has been repeatedly and promptly reported to the Führer and von Ribbentrop"—would not take "the initiative in military operations."[81] However, this communication, too, was never sent.

About three hours after Mussolini and Ciano had agreed upon it, Ambassador von Mackensen delivered to the “Duce” a letter from Hitler in which[82] the latter, after summarizing the negotiations with the Soviets and apologizing for not having informed him “because I lacked not only a vision of the scope these talks might reach, but also, above all, certainty regarding the possibility of success,” having emphasized the advantages that the pact with the USSR brought to German strategy and having presented the state of relations with Poland as having deteriorated extremely—all due to Warsaw’s fault—he wrote:

Under these conditions, no one can predict what will happen in the immediate future. I can, however, only assure you that there is, in a sense, a line beyond which I cannot retreat under any circumstances.

Furthermore, I can finally assure you once more, Duce, that in a similar situation I will show Italy my full understanding, and that you can be certain from this moment on of my stance in any such case.

Faced with the deferential and, all things considered, submissive tone of the letter, Mussolini was once again seized for a moment by scruples, but Ciano, skillfully playing on the Italian “understanding” requested by Hitler, easily convinced him to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the letter to inform Hitler of his decision. Thus, a reply with a very conciliatory tone (the pact with Moscow was

approved) was immediately drafted and communicated by telephone to Attolico so that he could forward it to the Führer; however, this reply finally announced the decisions already formulated in the telegram sent a few hours earlier, which had not been transmitted. Compared to that telegram (apparently at the suggestion of Attolico and Vitetti, and with the clear aim of making the pill easier to swallow while, at the same time, not closing the door on Germany for the future), the letter[83], however, followed the announcement of Italy's non-intervention with this clarification:

Our intervention may, however, be immediate if Germany immediately provides us with the military resources and raw materials to withstand the onslaught that the Franco-British will direct primarily against us. In our meetings, the war was anticipated after 1942, and by that time I would have been ready on land, at sea, and in the air, in accordance with the agreed-upon plans.

I also believe that the simple Italian military measures already taken—and others to be taken subsequently [the call-up of two classes and 38 battalions of the Militia, to be followed by others in the coming days]—will tie down significant Franco-British forces in Europe and Africa.

There is no doubt that by then, hopes in Berlin for Italian intervention were very slim. Mussolini's letter, however, prompted Hitler to make one last attempt. That same evening, von Mackensen delivered to the "Duce" another message from the Chancellor inviting Mussolini to specify "what military supplies and raw materials you require and by when, so that I may be able to assess whether and to what extent I can meet your requests for military supplies and raw materials"84. Up to this point, the affair with the Germans had remained at a level that was certainly not exhilarating, but all things considered, not such as to place Mussolini in a position of real moral inferiority vis-à-vis Hitler. Rome's Machiavellian maneuvers and subterfuges had, in fact, been justified not only by the extreme gravity of the decision to be made but also by Berlin's behavior, which was anything but correct and fair. At this point, however, the situation irretrievably descended into the grotesque, to Rome's complete moral detriment.

To appease the Germans and demonstrate his goodwill, Mussolini had written to Hitler that if Italy received the necessary resources, it could enter the war. Hitler's demand to specify the extent of these resources—threatening to "call the bluff"—prompted Mussolini, Ciano, Attolico, and Vitetti to resort, in order to avert the danger, to a ploy devoid of any dignity: hastily drafting a list of demands for the first year of the war that was so exaggerated (especially since, according to Vitetti and Luciolli, Mussolini saw fit to greatly increase and even double the figures provided by the experts and Attolico, and when transmitting it, he said—'due to a misunderstanding'—that everything had to be delivered before Italy's entry into the war") that not even with the best will in the world could the Germans have met them, so much so that Ciano noted in his diary that it was "enough to kill a bull, if it could read it" w. Suffice it to say that it called for six million metric tons of coal, two of steel, seven of mineral oils, and so on.[87] Consequently, Hitler found himself forced to make the best of a bad situation and, on August 26, sent Mussolini a letter in which, after stating that he was unable to meet the demands made of him, he wrote:[88]

Under these circumstances, Duce, I realize your situation and ask only that you proceed to engage, as you propose, the Anglo-French forces through active propaganda and appropriate military demonstrations. Since neither France nor England can achieve any decisive result in the West, while in the East—following the defeat of Poland—Germany will have all its forces at its disposal under the agreement with Russia, and air supremacy is unequivocally on our side, I do not hesitate to resolve the Eastern question, even at the risk of complications in the West.

Formally, Mussolini and Ciano had managed to avoid having to enter the war without, for that reason, having to denounce the “Pact of Steel.” In reality, the entire affair would indelibly mark subsequent relations between the two regimes and arouse in the Nazi leaders a deep mistrust and contempt toward the Italians. For the time being, however, Mussolini—and even more so Ciano—had little cause to worry about this. The main tactic used to “satisfy” the Germans, appease them, and demonstrate Italy’s true sentiments was to have the press emphasize positions favorable to German claims on Danzig and the Corridor and opposed to Polish “intransigence.” As Charles-Roux89 would note, the Italian press’s attitude did in fact become, as Italy gradually distanced itself from Germany, formally more and more favorable toward Germany:

to support Germany wholeheartedly through the press and politics in the eyes of world public opinion and the foreign ministries, to agree with Germany a hundred times over against Poland and the Western powers, to express verbal solidarity with Germany against the “demoplutocracies” of London and

“G. Ciano, Diary, op. cit., p. 334.

Paris, let the sword be glimpsed, though without unsheathing it alongside him: these were the concessions that Mussolini—deeply alarmed and caught in the trap of his own overly subtle game—granted to Hitler, who was now on the verge of acting.

For Ciano in particular, the most important issue had now become relations with England. These, apparently, remained on very good terms during the last ten days of August—certainly, paradoxically, better than relations with allied Germany. So much so that on August 27, Grandi was able to write: “Thus, all of a sudden, we are back to Italian-British cooperation. We have, all of a sudden, reestablished the Rome-London axis.”90 Today, it is easy for us to understand just how instrumental the British attitude was. London’s objective was to encourage Italy not to follow Germany and, if possible, to make use of Mussolini’s good offices to try to persuade Hitler to desist from his aggressive plans. But all this was to be done without making any concessions to Italy and without failing to remind it, at the appropriate moment, of its ambiguous position. In fact, no one in London trusted Mussolini anymore. Everyone was aware of his situation and the reasons behind his attitude. Buying—or, rather, having the French buy—his neutrality or, perhaps, a more committed intervention on his part with Hitler was pointless. Mussolini, citing the experience of 1915–18, would have wanted to be paid in advance, but this would not have guaranteed his future conduct; on the contrary, it would have made him more unscrupulous and more eager to secure further advantages. In the end, his true and definitive decision would be determined solely by his own interests and by his assessment of which of the two sides would prevail.[91] Given this conviction, London could do nothing more than encourage him and wait and see; and for this dual purpose, it served its interests to keep Rome informed of its negotiations with Berlin: on the one hand, to demonstrate to Mussolini Hitler’s duplicity toward him; on the other, to offer him an opportunity to intervene with some initiative that would put the Germans in a difficult position and that—even though London harbored almost no hope in this regard—might pave the way for an agreement or buy precious time. That said, it is not difficult to understand why Ciano—who by then was aiming for a complete break from Germany but knew full well how unpalatable that idea was to Mussolini—failed at that juncture to grasp this strategic maneuvering and might have thought he was facing a genuine shift in British policy. Less optimistic, however, was

Mussolini, so much so that, despite repeated British calls to act, he initially limited himself to pressuring Warsaw to accede to German demands,[92] and only on August 29 did he decide to take a not-too-firm step toward Hitler to advocate for a favorable consideration of the latest proposals for resolving the crisis put forward by London.[93] Nor should this come as a surprise when one considers

his fear—not shared by his son-in-law—of further jeopardizing relations with Germany, his desire to preserve peace, but above all whether this would have brought him an actual advantage and, if not, as Ciano noted on August 28,94, his beginning “to hope that the conflict between the others will be fierce, long, and bloody: he sees in this the possibility of great advantages for us.” Which, in simple terms, amounted to hoping to assert his “decisive influence” further down the line, when it would become crucial for the certain victory of one of the warring parties. Perhaps, if the British and especially the French had made concrete concessions to him, he might have adopted a more decisive stance. And, as some British documents reveal, feelers were indeed put out in this regard (though it is impossible to determine to what extent and by whom they were authorized)95. But in London, as has been said, they were not willing to enter into such negotiations. In this situation, it was not until August 31 that Mussolini authorized Ciano (at his urging) to inform—contrary to the assurances given to Hitler—P. Loraine of the decision not to participate in the now imminent conflict*.

It was only on the morning of that same August 31, after the arrival of a telegram from Attolico stating that “unless a new development occurs immediately, Germany will be at war within a few hours” ’7, that Mussolini decided to commit more fully. At 12:30 p.m., Ciano summoned the British and French ambassadors and informed them of the “Duce’s” intention to propose the convening, on September 5, of a conference to be attended by Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, the USSR, and Spain “for the purpose of revising the clauses of the Treaty of Versailles that are

96 See G. Ciano, Diario, op. cit., p. 339. The account in Vitetti’s “diary” (E. Serra, Leonardo Vitetti e una sua testimonianza, op. cit., p. 496) that Ciano had informed Loraine of the decision as early as August 26 is completely untrue. This is proven by the reference to the interruption of British telephone communications with Italy, which occurred precisely on the evening of August 31 (see DDI, vol. VIII, XIII, p. 408). It is, however, likely that the British were already certain of this decision, which, moreover, had been communicated two days earlier by Buffarini-Guidi to Monsignor Borgongini-Duca. See ADSS, I, p. 281. *

“the cause of the current upheaval in European life.” The Germans, he told them, had not yet been informed; before doing so, Mussolini wanted to obtain the prior consent of London and Paris, so that Hitler could not refuse98. Although Ciano had said that, given the rapidly deteriorating situation, he needed responses from the two governments as soon as possible, by dawn on September 1, when German troops crossed the Polish border, no reply had yet reached Rome. The French were the first to respond. Initially, the Italian proposal had been rejected in Paris. Daladier had flatly rejected the idea of a “second Munich.” However, it took only a few hours for him to change his mind. Faced with the certainty of an imminent war, the dramatic question that had been troubling so many French people for weeks—“mourir pour Dantzig?”—had begun to echo even among members of the government, at the Quai d’Orsay, and at the General Staff. At 11:25 a.m. on September 1, Guariglia informed Rome that the French Council of Ministers had accepted the proposal in principle, and less than four hours later he would telegraph that the Minister of Aviation had let him know that Daladier “is absolutely determined to restore Italian-French friendship ‘with all the consequences that entail.’” At 12:15 p.m., François-Poncet confirmed the announcement to Ciano, specifying that the conference should not “dispose of the interests” of unrepresented countries and that it should strive not to seek partial and provisional solutions to limited and immediate problems, but rather to address the full range of general issues “that are at the root of every conflict” and to achieve “a reconciliation that would make it possible to restore and organize world peace on a solid foundation,”0°. The British response, on the other hand, was much less prompt and clear. At 11:45 a.m., Loraine issued a vague and general statement expressing broad support for the proposal. That evening, the ambassador returned to Palazzo Chigi to deliver a very brief note in which the British government expressed its appreciation for Mussolini’s efforts to avoid a

conflict, assured that it was carefully examining the proposal, but, at the same time, added that the military action undertaken by Germany, however, raised fears that it would be impossible to proceed along these lines.[101] Despite this discouraging stance, on the morning of September 2, Ciano instructed Attolico to inform Hitler and von Ribbentrop that Italy believed it still had a chance to persuade London, Paris, and Warsaw to accept a conference based on three points: “1) an armistice leaving the armies where they are now; 2) convening of the conference within two or three days; 3) a resolution of the Polish-German dispute, which, as things stand, could only be decidedly favorable to Germany.”

Danzig is already German—as stated in the note sent by telephone to Attolico No. 102—and Germany is already in possession of collateral that guarantees it a portion of its claims. Germany has also already received its “moral satisfaction.” By accepting the proposed conference, it would achieve all its objectives while avoiding a war that now clearly appears to be all-out and of very long duration.

The Duce does not wish to press the matter, but he is nevertheless very keen that the above be brought to the attention of both Mr. Ribbentrop and the Führer immediately.

In the early afternoon, Attolico reported that Hitler had said he was “not averse” to considering the communication made to him. However, he first wanted to know from Rome whether the British and French notes presented to him the previous evening—in which he had been informed that Britain and France were ready to fulfill their obligations toward Poland without hesitation, unless Berlin provided assurances that all aggressive actions would cease and German troops would be withdrawn—were of an ultimatum nature or not. In the former case, in fact, he would not have considered any conciliatory proposal.

As soon as he received this communication, Ciano summoned Loraine and François-Poncet to Palazzo Chigi and, after informing them of the steps taken in Berlin and Hitler’s response, asked them to clarify the meaning that London and Paris attached to their notes. Here is how François-Poncet recounted that dramatic moment104:

I then said to Ciano:

“At this moment, coded telegrams are no longer acceptable. Don’t waste any time! Call Mr. Georges Bonnet immediately, and after him, call Lord Halifax!”

Ciano immediately follows my advice. He calls Georges Bonnet. The French Minister of Foreign Affairs, anxious not to let even the slightest opportunity to preserve the peace go to waste, is stationed at the Quai d’Orsay, close to his telephone. He immediately speaks with his Italian counterpart and makes it clear that the French note is not an ultimatum. Subject to the approval of his Prime Minister, Édouard Daladier, and the British government, he believes it will be possible to postpone France’s entry into the war until noon on September 3.

Ciano is pleased with the agreement thus reached, which restores his confidence. But this confidence is short-lived. In fact, when he contacts Lord Halifax by telephone, he receives a very different reception —one that is not merely cold, but icy. The British minister, too, assures him that the note sent to Hitler is not an ultimatum; but he states that, in his view, the planned conference cannot take place unless German troops first evacuate the territories they have already occupied and withdraw to the border. He will, moreover, consult His Majesty’s government on this point.

Ciano’s face darkens. He tells his interlocutor that there is no possibility that Hitler will agree to such a

condition. At 7:20 p.m., Ciano informs me that the British government has in fact unanimously endorsed Lord Halifax's opinion and made its acceptance contingent upon the prior withdrawal of German forces.

Mussolini does not believe he can convey such a request to Hitler and withdraws his proposal for a conference.

The account preserved in Ciano's diary[105] is more concise, but it fully confirms that of François-Poncet and concludes as follows:

It seems to me there is nothing more to be done. It is not for us to offer advice of this nature to Hitler, who would reject it decisively and perhaps with disdain. I convey this to Halifax, the two ambassadors, and the Duce, and finally I telephone Berlin to say that, unless the Germans indicate otherwise, we are abandoning the talks. The last glimmer of hope has faded. Daladier speaks in a firm tone to the French National Assembly. His British colleagues do the same in London.

Here, nothing new. The Duce is convinced of the need to remain neutral, but he is by no means happy about it. Whenever he can, he hints at our options for action. The Italians, on the other hand, are, without exception, pleased with the decisions that have been made.

Thus, in the early hours of the night between September 2 and 3, on the shoals of British intransigence —perhaps more so than on those of German intransigence, given that it cannot be entirely ruled out that Hitler, seeing his hopes for a new Franco-British concession fade, might have postponed for the time being his plans to seize part of Poland,106— the ship of Italian mediation foundered. The miracle of Munich would not be repeated. The very next day, World War II would begin in earnest. For Mussolini and Italy, too, a new phase would begin—one that, like for the entire world, would prove decisive. Before examining how Mussolini dealt with this, however, it is necessary to take a step back and pause for a moment to consider how, while the events surrounding the failed Italian mediation were unfolding, Mussolini and the regime were facing the first phase of the conflict triggered by the German invasion of Poland.

106 On September 3, Hitler wrote a letter to Mussolini (DDI, vol. VIII, XIII, pp. 385 ff.) to thank him for his "latest attempt at mediation." Among other things, the letter states: "I would have been ready to accept, but only on the condition that it had been possible to find a way to give me certain guarantees for a fruitful outcome of the conference. In fact, for the past two days, German troops have been advancing into Poland at a pace that is extraordinarily rapid in some areas. It would have been impossible to allow the sacrifices of blood made in this way to be devalued once again by diplomatic subterfuge. Nevertheless, I believe a solution could have been found if England had not been determined from the outset to lead to war at all costs. I did not back down in the face of the British threat because, Duce, I no longer believe that peace could have been maintained for more than six months—or, let's say, a year. Under these conditions, however, I believe that the present moment was, despite everything, suitable for resistance. At present, the superiority of the German armed forces in Poland is so overwhelming in every technical field that the Polish army will collapse in a very short time. I believe I must doubt whether this rapid success could have been achieved in another year or two. England and France would in any case have rearmed their ally, so that the decisive technical superiority of the German armed forces would no longer have been so evident. I am aware, Duce, that the struggle I am facing is a struggle for life or death. In this, my own fate counts for nothing. But I am also aware that such a struggle cannot be avoided for long and that the moment of resistance must be chosen with cool reflection so that the probability of success is assured—and in this success, Duce, I

believe with rock-solid conviction. You recently assured me in a friendly manner that you believe you can help me in some areas. I accept this in advance with heartfelt gratitude. But I also believe that—even if we are now marching along different paths—our destinies will nevertheless bind us to one another. If National Socialist Germany were to be destroyed by the Western democracies, Fascist Italy, too, would face a grim future. I was already personally aware of this shared destiny and future between our two regimes, and I know that you, Duce, think the same way."

Officially, Italians learned that Italy would remain neutral only on the afternoon of September 1 from a communiqué issued by the Stefani News Agency,[107] which announced that, under the chairmanship of the "Duce," the Council of Ministers had met from 3:00 to 3:30 p.m. and that, having examined the situation that had arisen in Europe as a result of the conflict between Germany and Poland, the origins of which date back to the Treaty of Versailles, and having taken note of all the documents presented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs—which demonstrate the efforts made by the Duce to ensure a peace based on justice for Europe—had given its full approval to the military measures adopted thus far, which have been and will remain purely precautionary in nature and are adequate for the purpose; it has also approved the necessary economic and social measures, given the phase of serious upheaval into which European life has entered; it declares and announces to the people that Italy will take no initiative regarding military operations; it pays high tribute to the Italian people for the example of discipline and calm they have demonstrated, as always.

The minutes of the meeting[110] say nothing about how it unfolded. For further details, one must consult the ministers' diaries—all of which focus more or less on the role their authors played and are quite sparing with information regarding the roles of others—as well as diplomatic records. In fact, in anticipation of the declaration of neutrality, Mussolini had urged Hitler to provide a statement attesting to his "loyalty" toward him, which he could cite to justify his decision; the Führer sent this statement in time for the meeting, but with the request that it not be made public for the time being.[109] Ciano is extremely terse:[110]

At 3:00 p.m., Cabinet meeting. The Duce speaks briefly. Then I speak, in a distinctly anti-German tone. The agenda for Italian non-intervention, already drafted that morning by the Duce and me, is approved. Everyone's reaction is very positive. Even those ministers—such as Starace and Alfieri—who had been warmongers embrace me and say that I have rendered a great service to the country.

Fortunately, Bottai provides more details:

Three o'clock in the afternoon. Cabinet meeting. Before we enter, Galeazzo whispers in my ear, "Everything will work out." Mussolini appears, dressed in white, looking pale. We take our seats. He begins immediately: "You are partly aware of the situation. Yesterday, we proposed a conference for September 5. England and France accepted, but the reply, due to a series of mix-ups, arrived this morning. Too late. Our position is clear; and it was clearly defined with the Führer: Italy would not be ready until the end of '42. And I explained why. The Germans could not, for any action before '42, provide us with what we would have needed: neither oil nor iron... 1942 was, for us, an absolute necessity. But, since I do not wish to be seen as a traitor, I telegraphed the Führer asking him to declare that, through this untimely initiative, he had released Italy from an immediate commitment. The Führer immediately telegraphed me to that effect. (Reads the telegram). And he confirmed his telegram in his address to the Reich this morning. England, in this situation, has behaved favorably toward us. France has been a little less so, a little colder. The Poles have ignored us. Only this morning did the ambassador make himself known. We could not go looking for them. Poland, there is no doubt, will be crushed. Germany is clearly superior in terms of armaments and manpower. The more I look at the map

of Europe, the less I understand what concrete help France and England will be able to provide to Poland. The French will hold their ground along the Siegfried Line. And then? It must be said, however, that the Führer has defied fate: by October 15, he must have finished with Poland, because after that the country will become impassable. It is a considerable risk. See

109 See DDI, vol. VIII, XIII, pp. 330, 339, and 345. The message sent by Hitler was worded as follows: “Duce, I thank you most cordially for the diplomatic and political assistance you have recently extended to Germany and its just cause. I am confident that, with Germany’s military forces, I will be able to fulfill the task assigned to us. I therefore believe that, under these circumstances, I do not need Italian military assistance. I also thank you, Duce, for everything you will do in the future for the common cause of Fascism and National Socialism.”

1.1 G. Bottai, Diario cit., ff. 693 ff., dated September 1, 1939. Under the date of the following day (ff. 698 ff.), the following is also noted: “Grandi’s conduct. His remarks at yesterday’s Council of Ministers meeting were evidently coordinated with Galeazzo. They were intended to counter a feeling—unspoken but evident even in the Duce’s gaze, voice, and actions—that the declared neutrality amounted to a failure: to a “betrayal.” Certainly, this marks the end of the romantic and mystical period of the Axis. From Bebé Colonna, whom I saw yesterday morning, I knew that Grandi was discreetly boasting of having been summoned to “Palazzo Chigi,” where, he said, “they have suddenly become Anglophiles.” It cannot be ruled out that, beneath his demeanor, he is contemplating a ‘return.’”

Regarding the Anglophilia of those days under Ciano, the pages of Grandi’s diary contain, also under the date of September 1, some highly significant notes that demonstrate just how many illusions the foreign minister harbored regarding the “new” British attitude toward Italy—to the point of accusing even Grandi, who was more cautious and less optimistic on this matter, of “lukewarmness” toward England. D. Grandi, *Diary Fragments*, in the D. Grandi Archive, b. 151, file 199, subfolder 3.

He means that the Germany-Poland match is not the final one. We are ready for any eventuality. I do not believe that France will attack us. Yes, there are fantastical plans by those swashbucklers in the French General Staff: to advance into Lombardy, then attack Germany from behind. But that’s pure fantasy. They’ll have to deal with us. Our situation is more precarious in Libya: there, the balance of forces is against us. The AO will defend itself. In the Aegean, there is no reason to worry as long as Turkey does not declare itself.”

Grandi emphasizes: “We must prepare ourselves, in any case, for the ‘betrayal’ controversy. Well, let’s start by acknowledging that, in any event, we are the ‘betrayed,’ not the ‘betrayers.’ Just as we were the ‘betrayed’ and not the ‘betrayers’ in 1914.” And he reiterates the argument regarding the deadline set for ’42. I support this position, noting that the pact with Russia constitutes another act of “betrayal” on ideological, moral, and spiritual grounds.

Galeazzo repeatedly holds up a stack of papers. As if to say: here is the evidence—and there is plenty of it.

Mussolini adds: “Ribbentrop was mistaken; and he misled his superior. Germany is off to a bad start.”

As for Grandi, his diary entries read112:

The Duce enters with a furrowed brow, solemn and pale, his face bearing the signs of his inner turmoil. He does not linger, as he usually does, to explain the situation. He merely reads a telegram from Hitler

in which Hitler exempts him from entering the war alongside allied Germany and proclaims a state of "non-belligerence" for Italy. Then he automatically concludes: "If no one wishes to speak…" I ask to speak. "Allow me to express my thoughts frankly. In 1914, Italy—an ally of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the German Empire—found itself in a similar situation. The Central Powers declared war without consulting Italy, their ally, thereby violating the terms of the alliance. The Italian government rightly declared neutrality. This led to accusations of treason against Italy—serious accusations that have weighed heavily on our country for two full decades. We must not run the same risk a second time. I therefore wonder whether it might not be timely and wise to take advantage of the situation: Germany has breached the agreements, which explicitly stipulated that Germany would not wage war before 1943. Italy therefore has the right to denounce the alliance treaty and fully regain its freedom of action. The concept of "non-belligerence"—which is, in fact, neutrality—seems imprecise, vague, and open to misinterpretation both now and in the future." Bottai, Minister of National Education, gestures as if to speak. The Duce stops him with a wave of his hand and, without answering me, jumps to his feet: "The meeting is over." He leaves the room. Ciano is visibly annoyed by my intervention. In the early evening, he comes to see me at the Ministry of Justice. He tells me without preamble: "The Duce was irritated by what you said this morning at the Council of Ministers, and he has instructed me to remind you of the commitment you made not to meddle in foreign policy matters..."

The last available firsthand account of the meeting is that of the Minister of Trade and Currency, F. Guarneri. Here it is, B:

3:00 p.m., at the Ministry of the Interior. Ciano arrives, beaming. He announces that at the Council of Ministers, the Duce will submit a proposal to declare Italy's neutrality. He takes me aside to tell me that we must prepare to restore normal life to the country as soon as possible and to take advantage, for currency purposes, of the situation that will arise from the Council of Ministers' deliberations.

The Council of Ministers is in full session.

The Duce, calm, gives a brief overview of the situation.

An attempt he made yesterday to convene a conference of the five great powers could not come to fruition due to the fateful delay in decision-making.

He reads the statement he proposes be approved and released to the press. Declaration of neutrality...

Upon finishing the reading, the Duce adds: "Given the way events have unfolded, no one will be able to say before history that Italy has failed in its commitments to its ally. Hitler's statements to the German people make it clear that he is not asking for our intervention, assuming that Germany can manage on its own."

He reads a telegram from Hitler confirming this statement and thanking the Duce for what he has done in this situation.

Minister Grandi believes it is necessary to begin preparing, as of now, the evidence needed to demonstrate—today and tomorrow—to the Italian people and international public opinion that Germany has breached the agreements, not us.

Ciano states that the documentation on the matter is overwhelming.

“From May 1938 onward, our course of action has been consistent: Italy cannot venture into an armed conflict before 1943. Germany forced us into a war situation without consulting us. The Salzburg meeting between Ribbentrop and me took place because the Duce, suspecting that something serious was afoot, ordered me to arrange the meeting. The German-Soviet Pact was concluded without our knowledge. In light of the treaties and history, our position is beyond reproach.”

The declaration of neutrality was approved unanimously.

The Duce adjourned the session amid applause from the ministers and retired to his office at the Ministry of the Interior.

As can be seen, the four accounts present various and not insignificant differences. These are so obvious that we will not even pause to point them out. There are, however, two points we wish to emphasize. Mussolini’s position was characterized by a concern to defend himself against the accusation of having reneged on the treaties concluded with Germany, by a hostility toward France that was far more intense than toward England, and by the absence of any hint that might suggest even a latent intention on his part to completely break away from Germany in the future. A stance—and this brings us to the second point we wish to emphasize—that was quite different from that of Ciano, Grandi, and, all things considered, even Bottai, who, on the contrary, showed a more or less marked tendency to distance themselves even further from Germany, if not to break with it altogether. The drama of “non-belligerence,” it is clear, arose from “non-belligerence” itself. Choosing neutrality, under those conditions, meant little: the true and definitive choice had yet to be made. And for Mussolini, it would be a much more difficult choice. That evening, upon returning to Palazzo Venezia, the “Duce” would telephone Milan, to the *Popolo d’Italia*, and ask Pini for his initial impressions of the government’s decision[14]:

- Positive, but perhaps too positive, because many have interpreted it to mean that a lasting and secure peace is now certain for Italy.

He interrupted me:

- It’s the usual pacifists. I forbade a celebratory rally that they wanted to hold for me here, in Piazza Venezia...

And then, even more important than Mussolini’s concerns and uncertainties—which had subsided for the moment but were inevitably destined to flare up again—was the international situation in which he had to act. A situation, as far as Italy was concerned, that was entirely unique and more difficult than for any other country, since the events—both past and recent—of Mussolini’s political career had placed Italy in the dramatic position of being viewed with suspicion and hostility by everyone, from the Anglo-French as well as the Germans. To the point that they seriously suspected Italy might at any moment “switch sides to the enemy,” as in ’i5 115, and feared that they might open hostilities not only against Germany but also against Italy itself,I6.

As soon as the Cabinet meeting ended, Mussolini sent for Guarneri. Upon entering, Guarneri said to him, “I’m breathing a sigh of relief, and so are all Italians.” Mussolini, as we have just mentioned, was not yet entirely certain that, given how far things had gone, the Anglo-French would not go to war against him as well. In the event that this did not happen—as he hoped—he nevertheless immediately made his intentions clear. If the Allied declaration of war were limited to Germany, “our position will be clear, our ships will be able to resume sailing, and trade will be able to resume to our advantage”

’17. And three days later, once the “uncertainty” regarding the stance of London and Paris had been resolved, he summoned him again[1.8].

He asks me if I have set the machinery for foreign supplies in motion. I reply: yes, but we must not expect immediate results. Furthermore, it is essential to establish precise guidelines first. Are we permitted to conduct business with England and France?

Answer: “Yes. The Italian political directive is this: we must be strong enough that no one can force us to enter the war. Our neutrality must allow us to work. Even major arms supplies may be negotiated, subject to case-by-case decisions. Sales must be made for cash. We must focus above all on materials for rapid construction. Credit agreements with Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria must be reviewed based on these criteria.”

So it is settled.

He repeats to me that he expects Poland to be conquered quickly. “But if peace cannot be concluded immediately afterward, the war will be long.”

France needs peace.

“But Germany and England are preparing for a deadly showdown.”

After leaving Palazzo Venezia, Guarneri went to Palazzo Chigi. Ciano fully confirmed what the “Duce” had told him. He also added his own emphatic emphasis on the irreversibility of the decision adopted three days earlier[119]:

He tells me that it is in our interest to establish business relations with these countries [France and England]. This will reinforce their conviction that our decision to remain outside the conflict is final. “We must take advantage of the situation and work to the fullest. We must restore normalcy to the life of the country. The era of playing at being heroes must be considered over.”

There is no doubt that, once his decision not to intervene in the conflict had been put into action, even Mussolini was no longer under the influence of what Luciolli called the “Germanic spell.”[120] All the most serious and reliable sources agree in presenting a Mussolini determined, first and foremost, to seize the first favorable opportunity to reassert his role as a mediator and, second, not to impose rigid limits on Italian neutrality but to exploit it to the fullest to conduct profitable business and thereby strengthen the country economically and militarily.

First, because the economic situation was, especially from a financial standpoint, extremely grave. As Thaon di Revel had already admitted on July 19 before the Chamber of Deputies’ General Budget Committee—and as he would confirm at the end of the year before the Senate’s Finance Committee[121]—the state budget was in dire straits, a situation further exacerbated by the international situation and the military expenditures it entailed. Suffice it to say that, according to a memorandum from the State Comptroller,[22], the budget management for the current fiscal year 1939–40 stood as of September 12 as follows:

Deficit from the initial forecast 4,755 million

Deterioration in normal management 4,948

Appropriations to settle exceptional commitments arising from past events 4, ,732

Requirements arising from the current international situation 9, ,772

Total deficit 24 207

And this does not include the 600 million recently authorized for the Air Force to supplement air defense preparations—which, for payment purposes, were expected to be deferred to the next budget—nor the cost of the "Bottai reform," which had not yet been finalized, given that, at that time, its implementation had been largely suspended. The situation regarding gold reserves was no better. In fact, a lengthy and well-reasoned memorandum dated August 5, drafted by Guarneri for Mussolini,[123] shows that as of June 30, 1939, the Bank of Italy's reserves amounted to 3,050 million lire; in practice, however, they were only 1,650 million, since 1,400 million were committed on demand or in the short term to foreign creditors, and this figure did not take into account that, as of the same date, securities and receivables belonging to foreign entities totaling approximately 3,000 million lire were frozen in Italy. And this was in a situation where, in anticipation of a long war and the possibility that it might also involve Italy, it was necessary—as long as possible—to pursue a policy of building up large stockpiles for the armed forces, the national economy, and food supplies, and to lay the famous groundwork for the country's basic self-sufficiency. No longer solely—or even primarily—to bring about the shift toward autarky ("No one," as Guarneri124 would in fact recall, "spoke of autarky anymore, or spoke of it only to warn that it could be fully and rapidly achieved in only one way: namely, through the creation of 'reserves'"), but to ensure that Italy would not be forced to subordinate its political choices to the need for supplies from abroad. Thus, to quote Guarneri125 once again, producing for export became vital—the only way to obtain the foreign currency needed to meet all these needs:

Rather than relying on those meager remaining gold reserves, it was necessary to focus on an exceptional inflow of foreign currency that the current situation and our industrial and agricultural production capacity allowed us to foresee as achievable with relative ease and speed. Life had to be sought, as always, in motion!

Second, because—unless the conflict ended quickly with a compromise peace (something Mussolini, deep down, was not entirely sure whether to hope for or not, given that the prospect of a long war that would exhaust both sides sometimes seemed to him the most advantageous for Italy)— —the "Duce's" view was that sooner or later ("only when we are well prepared," he told De Bonol on October 7[26]) Italy would have to enter the war against the Anglo-French, but with its own objectives, its own strategy, and in substantial autonomy from Germany, against which it would have to wage its own "parallel war"[127].

From this perspective, Mussolini's position was different—very different—from Ciano's. For the foreign minister, the declaration of "non-belligerence" was to be the first step toward completely breaking away from Germany. The diary of Bottai—perhaps the only prominent figure in the regime in whom Ciano confided—bears witness to this. Under the date of September 7, it reads128:

I'm going to see Galeazzo. He's getting ready to go to Palazzo Venezia. He's still gaunt; and as if burned from within by a fire, which makes him more human. He has, decisively, broken away from the Axis. He has already crossed the Rubicon, which the real Caesar still doesn't dare to cross. Every reference to the Germans is laced with contempt, almost hatred: a Palazzo Chigi mindset cooked

Livorno-style, with plenty of chili pepper, just like caciucco. He fears for the Duce: “I don’t see him as safe yet. There are always those around him singing war hymns. Achille makes him believe that the anxious people are waiting for his hands to be untied”...

The German-Soviet pact could have been a reason for a break. Another could have been the maneuvering and obstacles put in the way by the Germans regarding the resolution of the issue of the foreign-language minority in South Tyrol. In November, Ciano reportedly went so far as to hope that some incident would break out up there and to regret that the Anglo-French weren’t the ones to provoke it themselves.[129] What, however,

127 In this regard, it seems to us that the two most recent interpretations of “non-belligerence” provided by H. Cliadakis, “Neutrality and War in Italian Policy 1939–40,” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, July–September 1974, pp. 171 ff., and by B. S. Viault, “Mussolini et la recherche d’une paix négociée (1939–1940),” in *Revue d’histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale*, July 1977, pp. 1 ff., are essentially complementary.

What mattered was maintaining neutrality, “to take advantage of it at the right moment (for us; the wrong one, for others).” The war would be a long one; from the outset, he foresaw that it would last five or six years and did not share Mussolini’s hopes for a negotiated peace. After the Council of Ministers meeting on September 1, Ciano had told Bottai: “We’ll wait and see. We’ll enter the war when we see fit. And we’ll see on whose side. Because if the Germans intend to bring their Bolshevik allies into Europe...” 13. But even if that did not happen, “on whose side” Italy would have to take a stand is implicit in Ciano’s prediction regarding the final outcome of the conflict: “England will press on, waging the war to the bitter end, relentlessly, until its own defeat or that of Germany. My predictions point to a bitter, hard, and long conflict. Very long. And victorious for Great Britain” 131.

Mussolini, while on the one hand rebelling with all his might against being considered a “traitor,” on the other hand felt that he was the one who had been “betrayed.” “The Germans are the traitors,” he told Grandi on September 2, adding: “I personally telephoned Attolico to go to Hitler and demand, on my behalf, that the telegram I read in the Council of Ministers be sent to me, along with a reference in his speech to Italy’s position. They are the traitors,”[32] Nevertheless, he must never have seriously considered breaking the alliance—not even when he was in the grip of his most violent bouts of anti-German sentiment. On such occasions, it is likely that he took refuge and found comfort in some appropriate historical memory; as when, on September 16, he peremptorily instructed Sebastiani to “look up in *De bello gallico* the episode of the 10th Legion which, after a moment of disarray in the face of the Germans, regained its courage and fought valiantly,”[33] But, we repeat, he must never have seriously considered breaking the alliance. Based on the available sources, there is only one document attesting to the contrary: a note that Mussolini drafted on January 6, 1940, for Ciano in preparation for the meetings his son-in-law was to have in Venice with the Hungarians during those days. In it,134 under the sixth point, it reads:

Unless Germany commits further irreparable errors, we will not denounce the alliance. Intervention alongside the Franco-British is out of the question, as it would mean confirming military and colonial hegemony at Italy’s expense.

This seems to us too little to support the idea that Mussolini seriously considered the possibility of breaking the alliance; all the more so since, in Ibid., ff. 698, 701, and 706, dated September 1 and 4, 1939,

Given the context in which the note was written, everything suggests that the eventuality Mussolini had in mind—the "other irreparable errors"—referred to German-Soviet relations, that is, to a further strengthening of those ties, with a consequent Soviet incursion into the Danube-Balkan region, and not to the conduct of the war against the Anglo-French. A scenario that never actually arose before June 10, 1940. Hence our conviction that, in fact, the "Duce" never seriously considered breaking the alliance—not only for ideological reasons (the belief that England and, even more so, France were nations in decline), but also because breaking the alliance would have meant placing himself in open conflict with Hitler and, willy-nilly, switching to the other side. And this—as he would write in the top-secret memorandum of March 31, 1940, addressed to the king, Ciano, and the military leaders[135]—would, according to Mussolini, certainly have entailed "immediate war with Germany, a war that Italy would have to wage alone." Thus, his conclusion was that "only the alliance with Germany—that is, with a state that does not yet need our military support and is content with our economic aid and our moral solidarity…—allows us to maintain our current state of non-belligerence." And, likewise, just as he never seriously considered breaking the alliance with Germany, he never even considered (except in the event of a negotiated peace and compromise) not entering the war himself sooner or later. This was a possibility he firmly rejected.

"No one will think," he said on January 23, 1940, in the Council of Ministers,[136] "that we can remain completely on the sidelines. We cannot allow ourselves to be placed in Group B. It would be a demotion for Italy."

In mid-November, he made this clear to De Bono: "If we are not ready, we will not act—and under no circumstances against Germany," V7. And on March 1, he would state this unequivocally to Bottai in a conversation—which, as we shall see, proved very useful to us, both for understanding the course of relations with England during those months and for trying to clarify his idea of the "parallel war": "There are not three possibilities: there are only two: either war alongside Germany; or war on our own, in parallel" 138. Nor should this come as a surprise, given that all his most deeply held convictions led him to this conclusion. If Hitler had "betrayed" him by failing to honor the commitments made to him regarding the timing of the war's outbreak, that did not mean that the underlying reasons for the alliance had not been valid and did not still hold true. Germany's behavior could and should imply a shift in the alliance's perspective and greater autonomy for Italy vis-à-vis Germany and its war aims, but not a renunciation of the alliance, much less a switch to the other side. Italy would be guided solely by its own interests, and "Italy will not be independent until it has at least one free window onto the ocean" B\ This conviction of hers, which, as we have seen, predated the outbreak of the war, was now reinforced by another lesson: the decisive importance of technology in modern warfare demonstrated that "small states must either place themselves under the wing of the great powers or disappear" 14°. Hence, this provided a further reason to participate in the conflict and definitively secure Italy's place in "Group A," and to do so against the Anglo-French forces that were blocking Italy's access to the ocean. This was all the more true because, while Mussolini initially doubted that the war would end with a clear victory of one side over the other, as time went on he became increasingly convinced that if anyone were to win, it would be Germany. And not only—or not so much—because he considered Germany the strongest militarily, but because, as has been amply demonstrated, he was convinced that not only France but also England were deeply undermined and incapable of seeing the struggle through to the end. He stated this in the Council of Ministers on January 23 ("This war, perhaps, will not be won by Germany. But neither will it be won by England. England is deeply undermined, restless" 141) and he said it on February 28, in increasingly drastic and irritated tones, to Anfuso, though the remarks were actually directed at his son-in-law ("In Italy there are still imbeciles and criminals who think that Germany will be defeated: I tell you that Germany will win") 142 and on March 7 to Ciano himself: "England will be defeated. Inexorably defeated. This is a

truth that you—even you—would do well to take to heart."

At this point, one might be tempted to consider the discussion on the meaning to be attributed to "non-belligerence"—and thus also on what Mussolini's decision to enter the war on June 10, 1940, meant to him—closed. To do so, however, would mean precluding the possibility of understanding 1) that, despite this underlying attitude of Mussolini's, Italy's entry into the war remained in doubt until the very end and could have been avoided;

2) th —because the "Duce" truly wanted it; 3) and that, once it had taken place, he sought to give it a very particular character—namely, that of a "parallel war." But let's proceed in order.

It is not enough to say that Mussolini wanted to enter the war against the Anglo-French. It remains to be determined when, in his intentions, the intervention was supposed to take place and how this desire of his related to his hopes for a negotiated peace and to Ciano's policy, who for months—and essentially right up to the eve of the intervention—sought, as we shall see, an agreement with the British and, at least initially (though it is almost certain that he continued his efforts without his father-in-law's knowledge), with Mussolini's consent, even going so far as to take various steps clearly directed against the Germans. On this last point, let us recall, by way of example, three cases reported by Ciano himself in his diary: on November 28, he "appropriately informed" the Soviets that the Germans were supplying arms to Finland; on December 4 (in agreement with Mussolini), he had the French and American press informed "through back channels" of the atrocities the Germans were committing in Poland; on December 30, he "let it be understood" to Princess Maria José—so that she might inform the Belgian sovereign—that the invasion of Belgium was part of German plans,44. To these one could add several others inferable from diplomatic documentation, such as—again by way of example—the instructions sent on December 22 to the ambassador in Tokyo, Auriti, to work to encourage anti-Russian currents in Japan and pro-U.S. tendencies, "thereby also achieving a détente in relations with England."[145]

With regard to the first aspect of the issue, there is no doubt that Mussolini—convinced as he was that in reality none of the three major belligerent powers had truly wanted the war (not France, upon whom it had been imposed by England; nor England, which would not have wanted it but, having made the mistake of giving the Poles the spark that ignited the war, could not avoid it for fear of losing face; nor Germany, which had unleashed it due to a miscalculation that had driven it to adopt positions that were too drastic, which it, too, had been forced to entrench itself in for the sake of prestige)—and that none of them was truly capable of winning it, given the relative balance of their forces and the risk of playing into the hands of the USSR—he never truly ceased, throughout the entire period of non-belligerence up until France's defeat, to hope for the possibility of a negotiated compromise peace thanks to his mediation. It believed this to be possible especially immediately after the conclusion of the Polish campaign, even though, undoubtedly, the Soviet intervention of September 17 and the subsequent partition of Poland into two occupation zones—which made the reestablishment of a Polish state more problematic—had weakened this hope. But, all things considered, it must still have continued to believe it was possible to some extent even afterward. And, on closer inspection, he must have envisaged a compromise peace—in the sense that it would not, in any case, have enshrined Germany's total victory over England—even as he entered the war: even then, a compromise with England would have been reached, although the terms imposed on it would obviously have been harsher than those negotiable a few months earlier; but it would have been France, above all, that would have borne the brunt of the war. However, since—despite all his thoughts on France's decline and internal disintegration—he did not in the least foresee that the French army could suffer a collapse like the one it actually did, all of this is relatively secondary for us. What truly matters is trying to

determine when, before France's rout was sealed, he intended to intervene. It must therefore be said that Mussolini had no intention whatsoever of intervening in the short term and that, in all likelihood, until he was "forced" to enter the war, he never even went so far as to set a specific date for himself. Aside from references pointing even further into the future, to 1942, Ciano's diary provides us with three specific dates: on January 1, he spoke with his son-in-law about "intervention alongside Germany in the second half of 1941"; on April 20, at a time when, according to Ciano, he was "more bellicose and pro-German than ever," he spoke of the following August; but two days later he moved the date to the spring of 1941 '*. However, none of these references can be considered valid. Mussolini's only genuine statements regarding the date of Italy's entry into the war were made in the top-secret memorandum of March 31 and in the letter he wrote a few days later, on April 8, to Generalissimo Franco. This letter reads[147]:

It is my conviction that the war will take on increasingly harsh forms and that the position of neutral nations will become increasingly difficult. To tighten the blockade around Germany even further, the Allies intend to strangle the neutral nations that share borders with it.

As for Italy, it cannot avoid entering the war in the long run, and when it does, it will be on Germany's side. The date on which this will occur cannot be predicted; it will depend on the measures taken by the Allies, measures that are becoming increasingly suffocating.

It is my intention to delay the event I am referring to as long as possible, but I do not know if I will succeed. For this reason, I have ordered and carried out the mobilization of the fleet and taken other measures regarding the Army and the Air Force.

As for the top-secret memorandum, the passage of interest to us here is the following[148]:

Italy cannot remain neutral for the entire duration of the war without abdicating its role, without discrediting itself, without reducing itself to the level of a Switzerland multiplied by ten.

The issue, therefore, is not whether Italy will enter the war or not—because Italy will have no choice but to enter the war—but rather when and how; the goal is to delay our entry into the war as long as possible, consistent with honor and dignity:

a) so that we may prepare ourselves in such a way that our intervention determines the outcome;

b) because Italy cannot wage a long war—that is, it cannot spend hundreds of billions as the currently belligerent countries are forced to do.

These two documents hold, for us, the key to the problem of the date "envisaged" by Mussolini for intervention, as well as the key to understanding the political and personal drama behind the "Duce's" decision. Had it been possible, Mussolini would not have wanted to enter the war at that time at all and aimed essentially to postpone the day of intervention as long as possible. In addition to Franco, he also made this clear to Paulucci di Calboli on March 15, when the latter—having been appointed ambassador to Brussels—came to him for instructions: Italy, he declared, "cannot fail to stand alongside Germany, but I intend to maintain a state of non-belligerence for as long as possible." He did this to gain the time necessary to strengthen himself as much as possible militarily and economically, because in the meantime either new possibilities would open up for a compromise peace and for his mediation, or, in any case, the prolongation of the conflict would weaken both warring parties, because he wanted to be able to choose the moment most advantageous to him—the moment when his military

contribution could be decisive in determining the outcome of the conflict—and, finally, because, even if he had wanted to enter the war, Mussolini could not do so, given the hostility of the monarch, of a large part of the Fascist leadership, and of the Italian people toward intervention alongside Germany, unless a new situation had first arisen that would allow him to do so or, at the very least, one that he could present as necessitating intervention—and thus his decision as a consequence imposed upon him by the attitude of Italy's enemies—and which, as such, would confirm the correctness of his choice of side.

If one takes these four necessities into account, it becomes clear why Mussolini—even though he had identified the British and the French from the outset as the adversaries against whom he would fight if he could not achieve at least some of his objectives through a peace negotiated with his mediation—left Ciano free for months to pursue a policy that was not hostile toward them and even to seek an agreement with them. Such a policy, in fact, served to buy him time, strengthen his position militarily and economically, position himself once again as a potential mediator, reassure and rein in—both those within the country who were pressing for immediate intervention and, above all, Germany's opponents—and demonstrate to them the impossibility of both reaching an agreement with London and Paris and maintaining neutrality for the entire duration of the conflict.

Having clarified this point, all that remains is to try to pinpoint what Mussolini meant when he spoke of a "parallel war" and what his objectives were. As already mentioned, the first embryonic seeds of what would become the idea of the "parallel war" must have been suggested to Mussolini as early as the first half of 1939, as he became increasingly aware of how different Germany's views, objectives, and methods differed from his own, and how German dynamism—despite the commitments made and Hitler's assurances—tended to work to Italy's detriment, both by failing to respect its spheres of influence and by involving it in initiatives that Rome did not endorse and that corresponded neither to its interests nor to its plans. This realization was further clarified by the events that had led to the outbreak of war, not least the German-Soviet Pact with its dramatic aftermath—the Soviet military intervention in Poland—and, immediately afterward, the non-aggression pacts imposed by the USSR on Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—unequivocal signs of Moscow's intent to incorporate the three Baltic countries—the attack on Finland, which had refused to yield to Soviet demands, and—something even more serious for Mussolini—the equally unequivocal initial German rumors and reports regarding Soviet "interest" in Bessarabia1W. It was certainly in the face of these facts—all of which ran counter to his political and ideological views and interests—that, in early 1940, the idea of a "parallel war" took shape in Mussolini's mind. At first, perhaps, as a concept for some limited action aimed—should the opportunity arise—at strengthening Italian influence in the Balkans. Probably through a coup d'état in Croatia[151], perhaps even with the faint hope that, by seizing the opportune moment and giving it an anti-German flavor, it—like the Soviet intervention in Poland—would not provoke a reaction from the Anglo-French powers. It was no coincidence that he began discussing this very issue in the Council of Ministers at the start of 1940, on January 23 (a war, he said, "that does not become part of or entangled in the larger, general conflict: but a war with its own, specifically Italian objectives, unrelated to the current belligerents") 152 and with some of his collaborators, such as Ciano and Bottai. Later, however, the idea had to be refined, shedding the somewhat impromptu and at the same time reductive nature that had characterized it up to that point, and taking on the status of a genuine fundamental political-military strategy. Unable to share all of the Germans' objectives or trust them, and unable to sustain a massive, prolonged military effort, Italy, once it entered the war, would have to avoid dispersing and exhausting its forces to contribute to the achievement of German war aims, but rather exert its full capacity for action to achieve its own objectives within a period of six months,[153] thereby securing them by force of arms rather than at the peace table, where Germany might have sought to deprive it, in whole or in part, of the fruits of victory. In this regard, the way in which

Mussolini included the reference to the “parallel war” in the top-secret memorandum of March 31[154] is telling:

150 A highly significant reflection of the concerns raised by Soviet expansionist ambitions toward Romania is the interest that, as early as mid-October, the Italian press most closely aligned with Palazzo Chigi showed in Bessarabia. See, in particular, ibid., “Bessarabia Between Russia and Romania,” in *Relazioni internazionali*, October 14, 1939, p. 794, which sparked a whole series of other articles.

Excluding the possibility of a sudden about-face—which, incidentally, the French and British themselves do not contemplate, thereby demonstrating their appreciation for us—the other possibility remains: namely, a war waged in parallel with Germany’s to achieve our objectives, which can be summarized in this statement: freedom of the seas, a window onto the ocean. Italy will not truly be an independent nation as long as Corsica, Bizerte, and Malta serve as the bars of its Mediterranean prison, and Gibraltar and Suez as the walls of that same prison. Once the problem of its land borders is resolved, Italy—if it wishes to be a truly global power—must resolve the problem of its maritime borders: the very security of the Empire is tied to the solution of this problem.

And with that, we may consider our discussion of the political aspect of Mussolini’s position regarding the twofold problem concluded

151 This can be inferred from certain remarks made to Bottai upon his return from a trip to Yugoslavia on March 1, during which, as we have seen, the possibility of a “parallel war” was also discussed. See G. Bottai, Diario, op. cit., pp. 787 ff.

153 At the Council of Ministers meeting on April 2, Mussolini said: “We will wage war: under the best possible conditions and as late as possible, to maximize our preparedness. A war that will bring us to a conclusion in six months, because a longer duration would pose financial problems that are too serious, insurmountable. War today costs one billion a day” (G. Bottai, *Diario*, op. cit., f. 815).

of “non-belligerence” and its culmination in intervention. To fully define Mussolini’s attitude, however, it is necessary to examine another aspect of it—the more strictly personal one, or, if you will, the moral and psychological one. This is a very important aspect for understanding the behavior during those months of all those who played a role in Italian politics and were close to the “Duce,” starting with Ciano, who, although at first glance may appear the least vacillating, was not without his own uncertainties and ambiguities, as will be seen; but it is even more important for understanding the behavior of a man like Mussolini. Both because of his character and because of the mission he felt he was entrusted with.

All the memoirs relating to the months of “non-intervention”—and above all the diaries of Ciano and Bottai—unanimously attest to a nearly continuous and growing state of irritation on Mussolini’s part, with outbursts of outright anger or frustration, his almost uninterrupted agonizing, and his recurring polemic—internal, but not infrequently also overt—against die-hard neutralists, pacifists, and those who failed to grasp the inevitability of Italian intervention, attempted to thwart his efforts, had “deceived” him, and were still trying to “deceive” him. In some of these sources—and particularly in Bottai’s diary—considerable emphasis is placed, in this context, on the “Duce’s” reflections and outbursts regarding the theme of “honor” and the need to keep his word and honor the agreements signed with the Germans. To gauge the intensity of this state of mind and the impression it made on

those in contact with Mussolini, this entry by Ciano dated December 27, 1939, is highly significant:*

Long conversation with Bocchini. He complained above all about the Duce's restless mood—something noted by all his collaborators—and even went so far as to say that it would be good for him to undergo intensive treatment for syphilis, since Bocchini attributes his mental state to a recurrence of the old illness. I was very surprised—and dismayed—that Bocchini said this, although I, too, must acknowledge that Mussolini's inconsistency is now truly disorienting for those who have to work with him.

Passively noting the fact—or, indeed, drawing the conclusion that Mussolini felt he had made a political mistake and, on the one hand, was trying to hide it, while on the other, was wrestling with the dilemma of whether to persist in the error or change course, with all the risks that both choices entailed 157—is, in the first case, insufficient and, in the second, would lead

155 To assess Ciano's behavior—and even more so what he was writing in his diary—an observation by G. Bottai is quite useful, in *Diario*, op. cit., f. 831, dated April 23, 1940: "It is very difficult to follow Galeazzo's course amid the ebb and flow of his moods."

157 De Bono's position is typical; on November 20, 1939, he wrote: "It is truly impossible to understand why one would misinterpret not only Mussolini's state of mind but also his actual position: to understand both, a more in-depth analysis is necessary."

The first thing that becomes clear from a careful reading of these sources is that uncertainty and doubt are entirely absent from the various components of the "Duce's" state of mind. As we have seen, Mussolini was certain of the soundness of his choice and his intentions. Having had to choose "non-belligerence" weighed on him psychologically, made him uncomfortable, and at times humiliated him. The image of fascism in which he believed—which he had promoted and sought to instill in the masses—was a virile, warlike image with which neutrality had nothing in common; in his eyes, it appeared to be a moral, even more than a political, diminishment. "It is humiliating to stand idly by while others write history," he told Ciano on April 1.[58] And six months earlier, in a moment of deep depression, he had already let loose with another, even more significant outburst, about which his son-in-law wrote:[159]

The Duce was depressed this morning, more so than I've ever seen him. He now realizes that continuing the war is inevitable, and he feels the full weight of having to stay out of it. In a rare move for him, he confided in me. "The Italians," he said, "after listening to my war propaganda for eighteen years, don't realize how I can—now that Europe is in flames—become the herald of peace. There is no other explanation except for the country's military unpreparedness, but even for this, the blame is laid at my feet—at me, who have always proclaimed the might of our armed forces." He lashed out at Hitler for putting him in a situation that "would overwhelm many men and even shake a man like the Duce." He's right. There isn't much to argue with.

But one can say anything except that he was not convinced of the correctness of his choice. Likewise, no uncertainty, no doubt undermined his conviction that, if a negotiated peace had not been reached, Italy had to enter the war on Germany's side. His mood swings, his irritation, his worries had an entirely different origin. The same was true of his recurring outbursts against the Anglo-French, but also against the Germans. Very often, as usual, they were provoked by trivial matters; "that man truly believes himself to be extraordinary and therefore does not even notice the contradictions into which those closest to him place him," and about ten days later, on December 2, he added: "But everything, every single thing, has been a bluff, vulgar boasting, an outright lie," and he took it out on just about

everyone: “and everywhere, servility, sycophancy, lack of character. Dirty, petty, wretched things. How can one extricate oneself from this? Nothing can be said yet.” But a few days later still, on January 16, 1940, he seemed to have changed his mind, at least as far as Mussolini was concerned: “Mussolini is impossible to understand. As far as I’m concerned, he’s already finished: he knows full well the extent of his faults, but he firmly believes that the Italians haven’t noticed them. He has lost his prestige, more so in Italy than abroad. How many things and how many pointless antics should he repent for?!!” acs, e. de bono, Diario cit., q. 43, on the dates indicated.

a few news reports published abroad, which irritated him and brought back old fears and old grudges that had never truly subsided. At the root of these, however, was above all—in addition to a certain degree of jealousy toward Hitler’s successes[160] and his “freedom of maneuver”— — his increasingly clear awareness that British policy, and in particular the control of maritime traffic implemented by London to block German foreign trade, was making him more dependent on Germany with each passing month and was thus narrowing his scope for prolonging “non-belligerence” as long as possible and for freely choosing the moment for intervention. Hence his perception of his increasingly difficult situation as a personal humiliation, his frustration, his determination to make the British pay for it sooner or later (“It is unthinkable that I, of all people, have become the laughingstock of Europe; I do nothing but suffer humiliations; as soon as I am ready, I will make the British regret it”161) as well as his resentment toward the Germans who were taking advantage of this situation (“he took it out, as usual, on France and England, because with their policies ‘they lost the victory,’ and he took it out on Germany for having hastened a war that in three years ‘would have been won thanks to the disintegration of the democracies’” ’62). Other recurring causes of his irritation and outbursts were the unpreparedness of the armed forces, which led him to launch lengthy tirades against the incompetence of military leaders (the General Staff, he told Bottai on October 26 at the end of one such tirade, “is the body that prepares for yesterday’s war in order to lose tomorrow’s victory”), the systematic “deception” they perpetrated against him, and against the “royal” army (“there can no longer be the army of a dynasty; even if armies have ever supported dynasties, they supported them when they were at their height, only to abandon them when they fell”), which he contrasted with the “people’s army”[165], against the overly openly polemical attitudes toward the Germans on the part of certain party leaders (regarding Balbo, on December 8 he went so far as to say: “if he thinks he can stir up trouble from within, let him remember that I am capable of putting anyone up against the wall, without exception” IM) and, above all, against any rumor, news item, or opinion that attributed to him a desire to wait and see who would win so he could then side with the victor. Typical of this latter point was the intense irritation he felt upon reading the manifesto issued by the Third International on the occasion of the November 7 anniversary, which stated, precisely, that the Italian bourgeoisie was waiting for the right moment to pounce on the vanquished and seize its share of the spoils.[165] His numerous outbursts and threats directed at the king, the “bourgeoisie,” and the Church166 stemmed from the same source: in addition to his longstanding reasons for hostility toward them, he now accused them of being the mainstays of the neutralist, pro-Western, and anti-German “party,” while “the people” were with him and followed him and “him alone.” He was even ready to praise L. Blum if the latter wrote something that seemed to confirm this second conviction of his,[67]. Suffice it to say that, despite the undoubted improvement—as we shall see—in relations with the Holy See, on the very day of the Anglo-French declaration of war on Germany, he personally ordered the arrest of the best-known and most combative of the *Osservatore Romano*’s foreign policy commentators, Guido Gonella, and did not release him until the Vatican newspaper, having caught on, agreed to moderate the tone of its commentary and tone down its anti-German sentiment,[68]. Until the declaration of “non-belligerence,” it may have been useful for the *Osservatore Romano* to serve as an authoritative mouthpiece for Mussolini’s policies; now, too, it had to—if not exactly fall in line—at least not be too discordant a voice.

100 A typical manifestation of the jealousy and sense of inferiority toward Hitler that often drove Mussolini was the publication—personally inspired by him, despite his clear anti-Bolshevik stance and the concerns aroused in him by the German-Soviet Pact—by *Il Messaggero* on September 5, 1939, of an article (A Page of History: The Pact of Friendship, Non-Aggression, and Neutrality between Italy and the USSR), in which, regarding the German-Soviet Pact, Italy's pioneering role was highlighted—including in its relations with the USSR—and it was emphasized that Fascist Italy had been the first nation "to break the universal diplomatic conspiracy against Moscow and to lift the USSR out of the isolation to which it had been condemned." See G. Bottai, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 709 ff., dated September 5, 1939.

Although tied to that particular political moment and, therefore, useful for understanding Mussolini's state of mind and the psychological condition in which he had to make his decisions, these sources of irritation and these outbursts were, at their core, nothing more than the updated manifestation of his old and deeply rooted feelings. And, in the final analysis, they were not

165 See ibid., p. 364. In response to the manifesto, published in *Relazioni internazionali* on November 18, 1939, pp. 965 ff., Ciano had V. Gayda write an article, "Il falso e il vero," in *Giornale d'Italia*, November 8, 1939.

166 "We'll have to—" he told Bottai on April 15, quoting Machiavelli—"get to the bottom of this. The Church is always on the other side: with Austria in 1915–18; against Germany today. The Church has always been—I say always—the ruin of Italy. While others were dividing up the world, it gave Italians a substitute for concrete imperialism in the form of spiritual universalism, which sapped our strength. If I had the time, I would write a book—no more than two hundred pages—to prove what I'm saying. The Church was consistently an enemy of the Italian cause" (G. Bottai, *Diario*, op. cit., f. 826).

168 See, in this regard, ACS, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, Political Police Division, b. 31/b, file "Gonella Guido." Gonella, in addition to being a regular foreign policy commentator for *L'Osservatore Romano* (see G. Gonella, *Toward World War II: Political Chronicles. *Acta Diurna* 1933–1940, Bari 1979), was also editor-in-chief of the *Rassegna internazionale di documentazione* (a sort of Vatican counterpart to the unofficial *Relazioni internazionali*), which was forced to suspend publication.

not even the most vivid ones, and they did not truly capture his state of mind during those months. On closer inspection, these were different. Two, to be precise. Certainly, both were linked to his previous states of mind and convictions, but it was just as certainly the particular reality of those months that brought them into full focus and thrust them to the forefront of the "Duce's" mind, to the point of powerfully influencing his entire personality and his very way of living "non-belligerence."

The first reason for the deep discontent and irritation that characterized Mussolini's state of mind during these months—to the point of almost becoming an obsession for him and causing him to experience them as a reality in which the "fact," the political "moment" faded, often blurring with the "fact," with the personal "moment," and becoming the moral raison d'être of his life, was his conviction that he had to fulfill a "mission" that only he could carry out. A "mission" that he had intuited through his "genius" and that his "unyielding" will ("with an unyielding will, one is almost always stronger than the event itself; genius is above all will") had enabled him to begin fulfilling with the conquest of Ethiopia—and which now, despite all the difficulties and "setbacks," he had to bring to completion, to make a reality.

This concrete reality of the conquest of the Empire—he had told his old friend Ottavio Dinale Iw a few months earlier—was at first just an idea. I seized it, nurtured it, developed it, and brought it to fruition. But one concrete achievement must be followed by another. Life goes on, just like the revolution. The conquest of Ethiopia is not a point of arrival; it is a first step that would be meaningless if I did not have a clear vision of the other steps I will inevitably have to take and ensure others take... I have my fateful responsibilities, one might say, without fear of using big words. They were not chosen on a whim; fate or Providence—whichever you prefer—has placed them upon my shoulders. These responsibilities are the substance of a mission. And I am compelled to see it through to the end, until the mission that transcends me is fulfilled.

A portion of the Italians—the "bourgeoisie," but not only them, including some fascists and even various high-ranking leaders, valiant fighters, and veteran squad members—rejected the prospect of war; they did not feel their "duty" toward Italy or the "mission" it could fulfill. They even felt a kinship in their hearts with those against whom this "mission" was to be carried out.

"Italy today," he told Victor Emmanuel III in mid-April in an aggressive tone that was also accusatory toward the king himself,[170] "is already, in fact, a British colony, and some Italians would be willing to make it so de iure as well: a Malta multiplied a million times over."

Even the minor restrictions that the government was adopting at that difficult time worried them, prompting them to complain and to go to great lengths to evade them through a thousand "unworthy" expedients. Faced with this reality, Mussolini's increasingly common reaction was solitary, daily brooding, and irritation that, from time to time, manifested itself in angry outbursts directed at whoever happened to be within reach ("He speaks agitatedly, angrily, alone. To him, I am a silent extra. His adversary is this people…," Bottai noted one day[171]), and a growing desire to finally put an end to neutrality and thus force this "breed of sheep" to fight.

"When, in a people," he told Ciano on January 29 during one of these outbursts[172], "the instincts of a vegetative existence predominate, the only way to save them is through the use of force. Those struck will themselves be grateful because the beating that knocked them out prevented them from plunging into the abyss toward which fear was irresistibly driving them. Have you ever seen a lamb turn into a wolf? The Italian race is a race of sheep. Eighteen years are not enough to transform it. It will take one hundred and eighty, or perhaps a hundred and so many centuries.

And as time went on, his outbursts grew increasingly angry and irrational. So much so that, in April, he went so far as to state 173:

It matters little who wins. To make a people great, you must lead them into battle—even if you have to kick them in the ass to do so. That is what I will do. I haven't forgotten that in '18 there were 540,000 deserters in Italy. And if we don't seize this opportunity to measure our navy against the Franco-British ones, why should we have 600,000 metric tons of naval tonnage? Coast guard vessels and yachts would suffice to take the young ladies for a cruise.

In this state of mind, the party's task had to be to push the organization of the people to the utmost, reawaken their warrior spirit, and "clean out the nooks and crannies"—to combat all the pacifist "factions" and those sympathetic to the Anglo-French, who were pushing them toward a "vegetative," "bourgeois" life, deaf to "duty" and "heroic impulses." "We must keep them in line and in uniform from morning to night. And it takes a stick, a stick, a stick"174. And he did not limit himself to saying

this to Ciano and the other Fascist leaders with whom he spoke. He also said it to the leadership cadres, to the “hierarchies” of the Fascist federations who came to report at Palazzo Venezia.

The first and most important of these reports, given the repercussions it had throughout the country, was the one addressed to the Bolognese leadership on September 23. The party, ’75 said, had to proceed “with its complete mobilization, from the center to the outermost periphery.” The moment was turbulent and such as to put “not only the fate of Europe, but perhaps that of the continents” at stake. Despite the subjugation of Poland, Europe was not yet effectively at war.

The armies have not yet clashed. This clash can be avoided by recognizing that it is a vain illusion to try to maintain—or, worse still, to reestablish—positions that history and the dynamism of peoples have condemned.

It is certainly with the wise intention of not escalating the conflict that the governments of London and Paris have so far refrained from reacting to the Russian “fait accompli”; but it follows that they have compromised their moral justification for seeking to reverse the German fait accompli.

In a situation such as the present one, fraught with many unknowns, a watchword has arisen spontaneously among the masses of the authentic Italian people: to prepare militarily to meet every eventuality; to support every attempt at peace; and to work vigilantly, in silence.

This is the style of Fascism; this must be—and is—the style of the Italian people.

To this end, the party had to mobilize all its energies.

It is only natural that these momentous events and their repercussions in Italy have stirred emotions among us as well. But this special, understandable state of mind has been exploited by the smallest—yet nonetheless wretched—scum of humanity, who have reduced themselves to living in back alleys, storage rooms, and dark corners. It is to this dregs that we owe the spread of the “rumors” that have circulated, many of which—the most ridiculous ones—concerned me personally... Without dramatizing the situation—because it is absolutely not worth it—the conclusion to be drawn can be summed up in these words: we must clean out the nooks and crannies where, sometimes in disguise, the Masonic, Jewish, and foreign-loving remnants of anti-fascism have taken refuge. We will never allow them—or anyone else—to harm the physical and moral well-being of the Italian people.

The Italian people know that one must not disturb the helmsman, especially when he is navigating through stormy waters, nor ask him constantly for updates on the course.

If and when I appear on the balcony and call upon the entire Italian people to listen to me, it will not be to present them with an analysis of the situation, but to announce to them—as I did on October 2, 1935, and May 9, 1936—decisions—I say decisions—of historic significance.

The speech, as has been said, had a vast impact and, except in limited circles of the most intransigent and youthful fascists—who took it as an incitement to indulge in sporadic acts of violence against individuals known for their anti-fascist sentiments, or who spoke too freely against the Germans, or who merely read the *Osservatore Romano* or some foreign newspaper, contrary to what Mussolini had hoped for— It sparked a flurry of hypotheses and interpretations, the most diverse and conflicting. It was interpreted in the most disparate ways, ranging from warmongering to pacifist, sowing dismay and raising hopes, but above all giving everyone the impression that the regime was in even greater

difficulty than it actually was, plagued by internal conflicts more intense than they really were, and facing an opposition stronger than it actually was.[176] And this was not only among the

176 Among the many police and party reports on the repercussions of the speech, this one, dated September 28, though referring to Genoa and its surroundings, offers a comprehensive picture of the comments and reactions that can be extended to the entire country.

“While surveillance and measures against those who speak out—widely known among this population—have evidently heightened discretion and caution in speech, it is equally evident that those who speak out and their outcries have by no means been silenced, for the very words of the Duce to the Bolognese Hierarchs (words which—as was rightly pointed out recently — produced such widespread satisfaction, reassurance, or enthusiasm) were and are the cause of a small flurry of whispers which, though cautious and circumspect, can now be heard here and there among both the lower classes and the more distinguished circles.

“Listed below are those that stood out most for their nature and their persistent repetition:

1) That the Duce’s speech was interpreted here by many as a near-assurance that Italy will remain outside the conflict: it therefore generated widespread satisfaction, given that the majority here greatly fears war and hates the Germans.

2) That the Duce’s speech, on the whole, says little that is new, much less anything truly reassuring.

3) That the denials contained in the Duce’s latest speech regarding rumors concerning him personally confirm that there was indeed something to them, because otherwise he would have denied them much earlier, especially since the aforementioned rumors were very persistent and widespread.

4) For the same reason, the aforementioned speech confirms that there were disagreements with members of the government, high-ranking officials, etc., while the speech itself does not contain a precise assurance of the Axis’s continued integrity.

5) That the rumors circulating about disagreements between the Army and the Militia were also well-founded, as proven by the prompt measures taken—welcomed with widespread satisfaction among both military personnel and civilians—to equalize pay.

6) That Foreign Minister Count S. E. Ciano has fallen from grace since he was awarded the Supreme Order of the Most Holy Annunciation, as he is hardly mentioned anymore, whereas before he was at the forefront of every event, and that the next Council of Ministers is eagerly awaited, in part to gain some insight into this matter.

7) That there is undoubtedly great confusion in Rome, as evidenced by the succession of orders and counter-orders regarding so many matters of both great and minor importance: for example, even regarding the unified schedule, which here in Genoa has not yet been implemented by anyone.

8) That the call for peace and the call to accept the fait accompli in Poland, announced by the Duce in his latest speech, are a specific absurdity given the statements by the Anglo-French governments. And an absurdity also because Germany would then have the opportunity to continue the series of faits accomplis indefinitely.

9) That the Duce's aforementioned words contain, between the lines, the announcement of an Italian intervention to be decided upon more or less soon, but that the Italian people feel neither enthusiasm for war nor a desire to fight against France alongside the Germans, while widespread discontent is spreading among those called up from land and sea due to the repetition of call-ups, discharges, leaves, and so on, as well as for their pointless retention in the armed forces.

io) That the succession of call-ups followed by discharges, leaves, and then new call-ups, and so on, has disrupted and created considerable disorder in the mobilization centers and has contributed to the evident lack of discipline, particularly among those called up.

11) That the need to keep a watchful eye on opponents, announced by the Duce in his latest speech, indicates that he recognizes how the nation is far from united and that there is no shortage of opponents even within the Fascist camp.

12) That Italy only learned of the Russian-German Pact during His Excellency Ciano's most recent trip to Salzburg.

13) That the Duce had to acquiesce to the Russian-German Pact, just as he had previously acquiesced to the annihilation of Austria and Czechoslovakia, and endure considerable difficulties with members of the government, high-ranking figures, and even the Crown itself in order to prevent a spectacular collapse of the Axis.

The general public was unaware of these secret matters, but even within the inner circle of the Fascist leadership, many viewed the document entirely negatively. Ciano, who managed at the last minute to have certain passages amended before it was released to the press, deemed the section referring to the domestic situation exaggerated and fundamentally incorrect:177

Never before has the country been so united around the Regime and the Duce as it is today. To speak of factionalism, defeatism, etc., is to give substance to shadows. The reality is quite different: all national resentment is directed against Starace personally, who, despite having many qualities, is mistaken in his methods and style.

Bottai shared this view; like Ciano, he did not hide his dissent from Mussolini. In his diary, under the date of September 27, we read178:

14) That the Russian intervention is a double-edged sword because it carries with it the danger of the Bolshevik plague, as was immediately suspected from the very announcement of the pact itself, and as is in fact happening with the rapid Bolshevization to which the invaded Polish territories are being subjected, as extensively described by special correspondents from various Italian newspapers, including Turin's "La Stampa."

15) While the Russian intervention—and above all the rapid Bolshevization of the Russians in the invaded Polish territories—makes the blood run cold in the veins of Italy's wealthy classes, it has nevertheless warmed the hearts of countless members of the working classes and filled many sympathizers of that regime with joy.

16) It is not true that the Russian intervention was fully and completely premeditated in agreement with the Germans; rather, Russia intervened not only to protect its own interests but also to block Germany's long-standing bellicose ambitions regarding its march toward the East.

17) That Germany committed unspeakable atrocities in Poland.

18) That England is stopping and searching even our steamships and seizing them along with their cargo, as has already been done to several of our ships, which will soon make our situation untenable.

19) That the dire state of Italy's economic situation is evident, as is the massive printing of paper money and the paralysis of commerce in general and of port traffic in Genoa in particular.

20) That the already grave economic situation is made even worse by the large number of heads of households conscripted into the military, with disastrous effects on their businesses and families, as well as by the commercial and private insolvencies resulting from all this and from the paralysis of trade and commerce.

21) That, with regard to food products—and despite sporadic monitoring and sanctions here and there—there is a continuous, abusive rise in prices, especially for fruits and vegetables, which, on the other hand, are purchased from producers at derisory prices yet sold to the public with markups reaching as high as 300 to 400 percent.

22) That many evacuees are returning to the city, complaining about the sudden panic created by the government itself in early September, which led them to leave, exposing themselves to enormous expenses and serious harm.

23) That the Duce is, in fact, opposed to war, but only because he does not trust himself to wage it, fearing that riots might break out—just as he does not trust himself, at present, to move about too freely, fearing for his own personal safety.

24) That Italy's current situation, rather than being one of privilege as is claimed, is among the most critical, since the financial benefits deriving from its current non-participation in the conflict are fleeting and partly nullified by the British blockade, and because if peace is promptly restored, Italy will gain little or nothing. Whereas, if the opposite occurs, it will have to participate—unprepared—in a war that the nation does not feel called to fight and that cannot even be promoted through propaganda, since it is not yet known with precise certainty on which side our intervention will lie and what surprises the future may hold regarding the alignment of today's warring parties" (acs* Affo. Interior, Gen. Dir. PS, Political Police Div., Cat. I, B. 224).

From Mussolini. I tell him, frankly, my impressions of his speech to the party leaders in Bologna: the reference to "rumors" was excessive; the Italian public spirit, on the whole, did not deserve that implicit rebuke regarding the "little corners." All the more so because one must ask whether everything has been done to achieve a genuine cleansing: that is, a serious purification of morals; an enlightenment of consciences and minds. He agrees with my statement: "Yes, we must not dramatize certain inevitable concerns. I was just saying this to Farinacci, who attaches too much importance to them."

Despite these results and this criticism—and despite the fact that at first Mussolini had shown himself willing, as we have seen, to accept their validity—his irritation was so intense that a week later, speaking this time to the party leadership in Genoa, he returned once again to the same topics,

including the “little corners” and “rumors.” The only result of the previous experience was that, this time, the text of the speech was not released to the press. This was a ploy, however, that could only limit—not prevent—the damage caused by his outbursts. The number of people attending the meetings was too high to prevent—especially at a time like that—leaks, which, through word of mouth, ended up circulating throughout the country anyway, all the more so because some zealous Fascists even saw fit to disseminate the most significant passages via semi-clandestine leaflets. And it is impossible to believe that Mussolini was unaware of this. The fact is that, forced by the sensitivity of the domestic and international situation to remain officially silent (so much so that, in the face of this unusual silence, a joke began circulating throughout Italy that Mussolini had become “Mutolini”), the “Duce” could not rein in his growing irritation and was unable to refrain from expressing it at least to his “most loyal followers.”

But, as mentioned, this was not the only reason for his heightened irritation. Another matter troubled his mind, if possible, even more, and it is summed up in this remark—spoken, or rather, hurled in Ciano’s face—on February 7: “States, like individuals, must follow a code of morality and honor.” Forced to remain out of the conflict and already humiliated by this fact, Mussolini heard many voices around him—starting with that of his son-in-law—which, more or less explicitly, sought to convince him of the advisability of not entering the war even in the future and, if at all, of doing so against Germany. He knew that similar voices and hopes were circulating abroad, while news reached him from Germany that, in that country’s public opinion, “non-belligerence” was stirring up growing hostility toward Italy: Italy was still Italy—it was still the country that, now as in 1914, betrayed its allies when the time came to honor its treaties and stand by them. And this was happening without the Nazi government doing anything to prevent it; in fact, it even refused to disclose to the Germans the telegram in which Hitler had given him his “approval.”181 Faced with this advice, these hopes, and this accusation of “betrayal,” Mussolini rebelled with all his might, but at the same time, he felt powerless, seethed with rage and humiliation, took it out on everyone, holding them all somehow responsible for his predicament, and above all he harbored resentment toward those Italians who “did not realize” what this meant for the prestige of Italy, of fascism, and of himself—and even more so toward those fascists who did not understand or, worse, pretended not to understand that—aside from all the other risks—the “betrayal” would in any case have led to the end of the regime. As early as September 7, his state of mind was clear. Here is how Bottai recorded a meeting with him that day:[182]

I see Mussolini. He is dismayed. He speaks of “neutrality” with horror. “Betrayal.” “Better,” he says, “any war.” It is a mood that is spreading. “In any case,” he continues, “even if the Fatherland is saved, the Regime—which rests on prestige and on a military, warlike rhetoric—will go down.”

These words encapsulate the full personal drama of Mussolini’s situation in those months and offer the truest explanation of his state of mind, his deep unease and irritation. It reflects his search for comfort and confirmation of his convictions—not only in the idea of his “mission”—wherever he could find them: in particular in Mazzini, whom Bottai found him immersed in reading on April 15, intently underlining the passages that seemed to support them. Thus, Bottai recorded that moment in his diary:

He lifts his head and stares at us. Then, without preamble, he draws us into “his” topic, wholly absorbed as he is in gleaning from the book open before him the grounds for his eternal polemic. It is the twenty-seventh volume of Mazzini’s Works: specifically, the first essay on “The Convention and Turin.” He points his finger at underlined phrases; he reads a few of them, in which the Genoese’s fierce admonition for a higher moral life in Italy resounds: “an image of Italy—great, moral, virtuous,” or his rebuke against “a calculatedly disloyal Italy,” which “deliberately betrays its own promises,” so much so that one must say to Europe: “Do not trust us: Italy is a living lie.” With an indignant voice, he

hurls the apostle's words in the face of a hypothetical opponent! "This policy of deception, of devious ways, of ambushes, will be, as it was, the ruin of Italy."

The volume of Mazzini's *Opera omnia* is the 27th of the *Political Writings*, published during those weeks; the passage referred to is ibid., p. 12. For the "pamphlets" on the military agreements of 1914, see M. Mazzetti, "Italy and the Secret Military Conventions of the Triple Alliance," in *Storia Contemporanea*, April–June 1970, pp. 39 ff., where the documents referred to by Mussolini—found in the papers of his Private Secretariat—are, in fact, used and published.

The target is clear: Mazzini is invoked as a ally against the enemies of the Axis. The theme of "1914" returns. "I've done my research," he says, "by going through the files. In early March 1914—pay close attention: early March 1914—an Italian military mission traveled to Germany to arrange for the deployment of certain divisions in case of need. Everything was meticulously arranged: trains, junctions, stopover and arrival stations, the deployment and use of the troops. Precise agreements, therefore, that were betrayed by the Italian government. What do you think?" And he directs the question at me. I reply that a shift in public opinion subsequently led to a change in policy. He reacts promptly: "That's another matter. I myself told Hitler that I would not have hesitated, had the same circumstances arisen again, to act as I did. But the government should not have made a commitment; or, having made one, it should have kept its word."

Based on the available documentation, everything suggests that the reasons Mussolini gave to support and justify his political choices were sincere and that he was truly convinced he could not have pursued any other course of action. That said, it is our belief that his conception of "honor" and his conviction that, in any case, "betraying" the alliance—even if it had proved advantageous for Italy—would have brought about the end of fascism contributed greatly to reinforcing and solidifying this certainty of his. This was a perspective to which many men within the regime—and even true fascists—could more or less easily yield; these were men who prioritized patriotism over fascism or who, often, already sensed more or less clearly that the fascism in which they had believed and which they had hoped to see realized did not correspond to reality, or who had even always considered fascism necessary but transitory for Italian life, but one to which Mussolini could absolutely not yield, for whom Fascism had by then become synonymous with the "new civilization" and with the "historic mission" that Italy was destined to fulfill within it.

After what we have said regarding the political, ideological, and psychological stance that drove Mussolini during the months of "non-belligerence," the reader might be led to wonder why, despite this, we have described the situation during those months as still essentially open and, even more so, why we have spoken of a choice still to be made by Mussolini. The answer to this question lies in the internal situation in Italy and in the policy that Ciano—partly with Mussolini's consent, partly without his knowledge—was attempting to pursue, bolstered by the fact that, for the time being, the "Duce" wished to maintain neutrality. While it is true that Mussolini wanted, when he deemed it appropriate, to enter the war on Germany's side, it is also true that until the fall of France, the domestic situation in Italy—as far as both public opinion and, more importantly, the regime's leadership were concerned (and, at least potentially, Ciano's policy)—would not have allowed him to do so, and there is no basis for asserting that, without the unexpected and dramatic collapse of France, these two obstacles—and especially the second—could have been overcome by him, particularly in a domestic and international situation that was the least conducive to a show of force. Hence our definition of an "open" situation and, consequently, our reference to a "definitive choice" that Mussolini essentially had yet to make, even though deep down he was convinced he had already made it.

Ciano's position is significant in this regard. That he was aware of what Mussolini thought and wanted (his mistake was, perhaps, to reduce his father-in-law's attitude to a sort of "personal matter," stemming from his desire not to go back on his word and to underestimate Mussolini's other motivations) and that this caused in him a "profound estrangement from the Duce"[144]—one that was as much political as it was, as time went on, personal[145]—is beyond doubt. Nevertheless, until the fall of France, Ciano remained confident that he could prevent Italy from entering the war on Germany's side and hoped, in any case, that some new development might arise that would induce Mussolini to abandon his plan. As late as April 17, he stated186:

Mussolini is, by now, driven purely by personal considerations. He wants to keep his word; and he becomes irritated by anything that prevents him from doing so: technical factors and psychological factors. Nothing can dissuade him from this fixed idea of his. Only a major blow could do so: a decisive stance by the French and British might force him to face reality.

The date on which he made this statement—following the conclusion of the Finnish-Soviet conflict and the German attack on Denmark and Norway—suggests that Ciano was not thinking of a new military development, such as an Anglo-French success that would dissuade Mussolini from intervening on Germany's side. It is far more credible that Ciano was thinking of a political "stance"—that is, an offer of concrete territorial concessions to Italy to induce Mussolini to remain definitively out of the conflict or, more likely, to side with the Allies. For it is, in fact, difficult to believe that Ciano could have thought London and Paris were willing to make concessions to Mussolini merely in exchange for his commitment not to enter the war, or that Mussolini could change his mind without immediately receiving something in return. This is all the more true given that this was the framework within which he sought to conduct his diplomatic efforts with the dual aim of offering his father-in-law an alternative to his plans and, in any case, of delaying Italy's entry on Germany's side for as long as possible, in the hope that something might occur in the meantime to avert it.

185 If we are to believe what G. Leto wrote in OVRA. Fascism-Antifascism, op. cit., pp. 198 ff., the "rift" must at some point (if the report is true, probably in April–early May 1940) have taken on such a radical character as to lead Ciano to consider eliminating Mussolini and to turn to Bocchini to procure a special poison that left no trace. This report is not confirmed by any other source and does not seem very credible to us (see also G. B. Guerri, *Galeazzo Ciano*, op. cit., pp. 214 ff.); nevertheless, it is significant that it circulated and was deemed reliable by Leto.

It had always been difficult to influence Mussolini directly, but now it was even more so for those Fascists who were most hostile to intervention. This was due both to the significance his figure held for them—what he had meant during the "heroic" years and still meant for their very existence within the regime (a typical example is a remark by Bottai specifically regarding Ciano's "detachment": "Our generation is entirely in Mussolini: it is Mussolini. It is not a matter of measuring him outside of us, but him within us; and ourselves within him,"87), as well as because of the fear that the "Duce" inspired in the vast majority of his collaborators and party leaders, making it difficult and often impossible for them to take an explicit stand against him—especially if this had to be done directly and openly—and, finally, because the "interventionist" and "militant" element had been and remained so important and decisive in Fascism that its influence continued in some way to be felt even on those who were opposed to participating in the conflict and to the alliance with Germany—if only as a psychological factor that worked entirely to the advantage of Mussolini's position and made it difficult for many to radically dissent from him. And then there were a political culture and a mindset that had become entrenched over the years, with their myths, their grudges, and their conception of the role of Fascist Italy, which

tainted everything—even the positions and discourses that, in theory, sought to refute the interventionist and pro-German arguments. A telling example is a lengthy article by Nello Quilici—certainly the intellectual among Balbo's circle who most effectively interpreted and elaborated, in political terms, the position of the "Quadrumvir" from Ferrara[188]—which appeared in *Nuovi problemi*, the journal through which, in addition to the *Corriere padano*, the "Balbo group" expressed itself. Although the entire piece was aimed at refuting the hypothesis of Italian intervention and at demonstrating both that Hitler's vision was nothing other than the very same one Germany had been attempting to impose on other countries for eighty years, and that the only one who would benefit from the conflict would be Stalin—who would spread the web of Bolshevism over Europe's "universal ruin"— the article, when attempting to draw positive conclusions from the argument, could do nothing but invoke the "idea of Rome," thus ending up presenting Italy's position in a way that completely isolated it from other countries—and above all from France and England—and, unwittingly, played into the hands of those who believed in or hoped for a "new spiritual unity" of the continent along fascist lines, thereby weakening the strength of the anti-German stance. To all this, however, it must be added that, while it was difficult to influence Mussolini directly, the choice of "non-belligerence" nevertheless constituted a fact that—especially if handled shrewdly—objectively benefited the opponents of intervention on Germany's side, both because it strengthened their political clout within the state apparatus and because it made it more difficult for the proponents of intervention to work toward changing the orientation of public opinion, which was already largely opposed to them; and this was certainly the most effective way to bolster the king's confidence and strengthen his ability to counter Mussolini's plans and, if necessary, to engage in a showdown with him.

It is out of the question that Victor Emmanuel III would have viewed such a solution favorably—partly because of his character, partly out of fear of triggering a chain reaction that would be difficult to control, and partly because of the risk of provoking a German intervention "in aid" of Mussolini. It is far more likely that the king's preference, if it came down to it, would have been for another solution: the honorable retirement of Mussolini and his replacement with another Fascist leader who represented the anti-German faction within the party. And perhaps, at the Quirinale, more than just a passing thought was given to this possibility. As already noted in section 19, in March 1940 some feelers were likely put out—and perhaps even more than that, a concrete step—regarding Ciano, of whom the king held a high opinion and who, at that moment, would certainly have represented the most logical, painless, and, formally speaking, least humiliating succession for the "Duce." And, without encountering any clear hostility on his part—if we are to give credence to a Vatican note from early April, which Cardinal Maglione must have considered reliable since he did not even share it with Monsignor Tardini at the time, though he did inform him of it a year later, evidently so that it would be on record. The note reads as follows[191]:

Buffarini, Renato Ricci, and Starace are with M[ussolini]]; the others, especially the military ministers, are with C[iano]... A month ago, C[iano]] was in line to succeed M[ussolini]], and this could have happened at any moment. During those days, Prince Umberto came to Rome and had lunch with C[iano] every day for a week. The King sent Acquarone around to the various ministries to gather information, and sent Acquarone himself to C[iano] to say that "it was not yet time" (this phrase has not been explained). But now M[ussolini] has regained strength and control over decision-making.

All of this explains our conviction that, despite Mussolini's stance, the Italian situation was essentially still open and that Mussolini had not yet made a firm decision. Or, if you prefer, that there were still certain facts he would have had to reckon with and that might have led him to change his mind. All the more so—and this should not be forgotten—because, however much he pursued his ideological ruminations and made loyalty to the alliance a point of honor, the "Duce" was a realist and, at heart, an

opportunist. And he had such confidence in his own demagogic abilities that he believed he knew exactly how to “turn the tables” and, bolstered by concrete territorial gains, justify a change of sides to the Italian people.

In domestic politics, the announcement of “non-belligerence” set in motion a significant strengthening of anti-interventionist and anti-German positions. Although, in Mussolini’s intentions, this was meant to lead to intervention on Germany’s side, it could in fact only be managed by its proponents—if only to make it credible abroad, to avoid offering the Germans privileged avenues to undermine it, and to instill confidence in the Anglo-French, in light of both the massive increase in foreign trade that neutrality was expected to bring and a constructive diplomatic dialogue with them—particularly with London—which was indispensable for both Mussolini and Ciano: for the “Duce” to reestablish his role as a mediator, and for the Foreign Minister to achieve Italy’s complete detachment from Germany. Moreover, among the pro-Germans themselves were certain men whom Mussolini considered responsible for the “deception”—of which he claimed to be a victim—regarding Italy’s military preparedness. Hence the need, first and foremost, for a sweeping reshuffling of virtually the entire leadership—governmental, military, and political—which Ciano—thanks to his privileged relationship with his father-in-law, his power, and his shrewdness—skillfully exploited to install in almost all key positions men who were his own, or linked to him, or whom he, in any case, considered as such.

and the Minister of the Royal Household in March 1940 are also attested to by G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 403, 406 ff., and 411.

It took less than two months to set this reshuffle in motion, which was quickly followed by others at lower levels, so that it took on the character of a minor earthquake; in some cases, such as that of the PNF, it led to talk of a full-fledged purge. At the end of October, six ministers were removed from the government—Alfieri, Benni, Cobolli-Gigli, Guarneri, Lantini, and Rossoni (replaced by Host-Venturi, Pavolini, Riccardi, Ricci, Serena, Tassinari, and Teruzzi, to whom Mussolini ceded the Ministry of the Interior)—along with various undersecretaries, including two of the three military officials, Pariani and Valle. Of the previous ministers, only Ciano, Grandi, Bottai, and Thaon di Revel remained in their posts. The drafts of the letter in which Mussolini submitted to the king the names of the ministers and undersecretaries to be removed from the government and those to be appointed to replace them 192 reveal that what was most important to the “Duce” was to remove Pariani and Valle. They also show that he intended to remove not only the head of the Ministry of the Interior but also the three military officers from their posts. This decision was later abandoned; we do not know whether this was due to a change of heart on his part or to opposition—perhaps sparked by Mussolini’s intention to appoint Graziani as Minister of War, a figure utterly unacceptable to Badoglio, with General Soddu as undersecretary—from Vittorio Emanuele III. Our hypothesis would be confirmed by the fact that in the end—with Mussolini remaining minister—Graziani was not even appointed undersecretary (a position that went to Soddu), but rather Chief of Staff of the Army. In the first draft of the letter—the one that most clearly reveals Mussolini’s state of mind—the section concerning the military ministries (later toned down in the second draft with regard to the assessment of Pariani and modified by replacing General Pinna’s name with that of General Pricolo) was worded as follows:

I now turn to the military ministries.

Gen. Pariani is very stubborn. He possesses many qualities and indisputable achievements, but in recent times he has not been up to the task, and above all, he is exceptionally optimistic. He belongs to the category of men who let their desires run ahead of reality. The problems with the latest call-ups have been too numerous and too widespread. There is a very palpable sense of unease among the ranks

and throughout the country, as reflected in the accounts of those who have been called up.

To regain the upper hand, we need a man of prestige and a born fighter: I see no one other than General Graziani. Pariani could assume command of the Army Group, currently held by Graziani.

I am satisfied with Cavagnari, although the navy's reliance on large battleships has been called into question by recent events; I am not satisfied with Valle, who—even he!—is all about the future and pays little attention to the present: if necessary, he could be replaced by the Sardinian Pinna, currently Deputy Chief of the General Staff.

If Mussolini wanted above all to get rid of certain men, Ciano, as has been said, was primarily concerned with having his own men—or those presumed to be such—appointed, such as Pavolini and Riccardi, and, as he believed, Ricci.[193] Ciano also played a role in the selection of the military undersecretaries, advocating for the retention of Cavagnari (whom Mussolini was initially tempted to replace with Admiral A. Riccardi) and suggesting Pricolo in place of Pinna, because Pinna was "too closely tied to the work of his predecessor" 194.

The dismissals from the government with the greatest political significance were those of Alfieri and Pariani, both pro-German and holding key positions. The entire cabinet reshuffle and, a month later, the appointment of Grandi as president of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations (while he continued to serve as Minister of Justice)[195], did not, however, cause as much of a stir or carry the same significance for the general public as the simultaneous removal of Starace from the general secretariat of the PNF. Since Starace was the regime's most typical and unpopular representative and one of its best-known pro-German figures, his removal was seen by many as a liberation and sparked hope for a change of course. This was all the more so because some of the first actions taken by the new Secretary-General, Ettore Muti—announced at the Grand Council meeting on December 7—and in particular the loosening of the party's control over a number of organizations, including the OND, CONI, UNUCI, and the Naval League, seemed to confirm these hopes. Nor were these the only hopes. Even the Fascists most aware of the risk the regime faced at that time of losing touch with the country and of the crisis the party was undergoing, despite the vast powers it held and the enormous number of members it had on paper, welcomed the end of Starace's leadership as an extremely positive development, one that could revitalize and relaunch the PNF and provide the regime with the necessary tool to overcome the current difficulties and establish a new and effective relationship with the country. Typical in this regard is the position of the Bottai group, which in *Critica fascista* went so far as to speak of a "new period" for the

195 It is interesting to note that while in early July Ciano had been, as mentioned, opposed to Grandi's candidacy—going so far as to prefer that of Farinacci or "a lackluster figure such as Teruzzi or Acerbo"—he now advocated for it with Mussolini, who had initially considered "a mediocre figure picked up by fascism" such as De Francisci. See ibid., pp. 318 and 368.

history of the party that was unfolding. A new period in which, at last, the power of Fascism would no longer be justified by having "carried out the revolution," but by having to carry it out, and the Fascists would live within the party196

tlto by participating in its inner life with conscience, intelligence, and faith, in accordance with the principles of a living, dynamic discipline that seeks out and fosters new values, in an unceasing effort of "anticipation" by which, in our view, the revolutionary mettle of men, their intelligence, and their very virility are measured.

The decision to remove Starace from the PNF (who, after initially being considered for the post of governor of the Aegean, was appointed Chief of Staff of the MVSN) was not an easy one for Mussolini. It can be ruled out that the decision was prompted—as has also been claimed—by the fact that, in his zeal to enforce the restrictions imposed in the weeks surrounding the announcement of "non-intervention," Starace had gone so far as to personally check whether the cars circulating in the capital had the proper authorization, much to Mussolini's outrage. The decision was, instead, entirely political, and the "Duce," as has been noted, did not take it lightly. Nor did he certainly make it merely because Starace was disliked by virtually everyone and pro-German. Even though he sometimes reproached him for his excessive zeal and certain "gaffes" that made the regime a laughingstock, Mussolini had little to criticize regarding his management of the party and appreciated—as has been noted—his unwavering loyalty and fanatical commitment to transforming Italians into an orderly, obedient, and virtuous people of "believers" and "fighters" ("Starace has gone against the grain on matters of style. Yet this is one aspect of his work that endures," he told Bottai on November 7, smugly showing him the drafts of the Vademecum of Fascist Style, in which A. Gravelli had compiled a selection of Starace's directives (198). The reason for his dismissal lies not only in the relentless campaign waged against him by Ciano—who had completely forgotten the three years of close collaboration between them (even Bottai, who was certainly no friend of Starace's, would note critically on October 31, when the ouster became official: "Ciano in jubilation... an unbridled joy, without even a shadow of responsibility..."), in the fact that in August Starace had consistently assured Mussolini that the overwhelming majority of the country favored the Axis and intervention, while Bocchini, on the other hand, reported the exact opposite to him. A very serious matter, made even more grave by another: having met in Mussolini's anteroom, Starace and Bocchini had nearly come to blows, with the party secretary accusing the police chief of being a lukewarm fascist and almost a traitor, and the police chief accusing Starace of insincerity, criminal recklessness, and a fatuous and ridiculous policy that had by then become the object of ridicule and trepidation1W. With matters having reached this point, it was clear that one of the two heads had to roll, and it could only be Starace's—even though, all things considered, the "Duce" was reluctant to part with his "watchdog" and had no clear idea of whom to put in his place 200. It was therefore not difficult for Ciano to install one of his own men as party secretary as well. Bottai's diary attests that at first Ciano considered Pavolini, Ricci, and Riccardi[201]; then, when the possibility arose for them to become ministers, his choice fell on MutiM2, whom he had used in Spain and Albania and whom he considered not only "sincere" (probably in his anti-German intentions 203), but also someone who "will follow me like a child" 204.

In reality, the choice could hardly have been worse. As secretary of the PNF, Muti—a 37-year-old from Romagna, virtually devoid of political experience and driven solely by action for action's sake—was, in fact, a resounding failure. Unable to keep the party under control or to attempt to renew it and give it new momentum, completely unsuited to organizational work, lacking a political line of his own, yet sensitive and self-centered enough to break away from Ciano as soon as he realized that Ciano wanted to lead him by the hand and had placed a sort of supervisor at his side in the form of a Foreign Ministry official seconded to him, it took only a few weeks for the hopes placed in him to vanish, for new mistrust and discredit to spread within the party and over it, and for Muti to even make many Fascists —who had not been admirers of Starace but who realized how important it would have been for the regime at that moment to have a united and efficient party—to miss Starace. Ciano's diary attests to the rapid decline of the foreign minister's hopes. As early as January 13, 1940—less than two and a half months after Muti's appointment—it reads: "5:

According to Ciano, Starace's power of intimidation was such that it even influenced the Carabinieri, "who no longer dared to tell the truth." See G. Bottai, *Diario*, op. cit., f. 715, dated September 7,

1939.

The Duce spoke to me about Muti. He said that there is now a lack of firmness in the Party's leadership. This stands in too sharp a contrast with Starace's rigid formalism, "which he adored." I had to agree with him: Muti has surrounded himself with the wrong people and is presumptuous. I don't think he'll last long.

And under the entry for March 13, 206:

Casertano reports to me on the state of the Party: disastrous. Muti, with whom I will make no further effort, has proven to be presumptuous and touchy, and, as is often the case, less devoted than I had judged him to be. There was nothing left to do but abandon him to his fate.

Bottai's diary also offers similar accounts (with whom Ciano soon resumed weighing the options for Muti's possible successors: Ricci, Pavolini, Bottai himself), including this entry, dated March 12, 1940, in which the discussion took on a more political tone and sought to delve into the reality of the PNF 208:

"The time will come," I prophesied jokingly to those who had grown impatient with Starace in his final days, "when we will miss Starace." Have we reached that point? No, from an individual standpoint, since this rough-and-tumble yet generous hero [Muti] is as likable as a big kid. But from the Regime's standpoint, yes. All the more so because, even though Starace is gone, "Staracism" remains—and Starace the man was not the worst part of Staracism the system.

Given the hollowing out, bureaucratization, and formalism imposed on party life—and the resulting impossibility for the party to possess any real vitality or fulfill an effective formative function—Starace had been the best secretary the PNF could have had by then. Despite all his limitations and flaws, he had still managed to prevent the party's collapse and, as far as possible, had strived to give it a purpose —both in terms of preserving its energy and maintaining its presence within the regime and in relation to other state bodies. After Starace, the party's decline would become increasingly rapid and disastrous for the regime. Under Muti's leadership, the PNF, on the one hand, continued along the stifling, bloated, bureaucratic, and unnecessarily oppressive path that Starace had set; on the other hand, it lost even that minimal function it had possessed up to that point. The directives he issued in mid-January 1940 during his first report to the federal leaders of central Italy 209 are significant in this regard. The seven points into which they were divided either repeated what Starace had already said

Starace, or followed the same line; and where they seemed to introduce something new, they lacked any concrete guidance on how to implement them. Nor was the last point—which committed the party to "uncompromising" support for the regime's measures in favor of the working masses—sufficient to give them any "revolutionary" political value, was certainly the last point, which committed the party to providing "uncompromising" support for the regime's measures in favor of the working masses, given that in practice it all boiled down to ensuring that employers did not evade their legal obligations regarding social assistance (and in particular the payment of the fifty-third week of wages): a task too limited to revitalize the party and truly establish its roots in the world of labor, but one that, nevertheless, led to an unwelcome blurring of roles with the labor union and heightened the suspicions and hostility toward the PNF among the productive bourgeoisie, at a time when any effort to win back and reassure support was needed most of all from that very sector. Nor, finally, was Muti's appointment helpful to Ciano in terms of his anti-German policy, since the new secretary proved, in this regard as well, to lack clear ideas and to be too eager to act on his own to avoid being influenced by pro-Nazi

circles; rather than refraining from taking positions that were in themselves insignificant but which, instead of keeping the party as united as possible, sowed confusion within it; and, above all, to avoid adopting—as was predictable given his nature—bellicose attitudes and admiration for German military successes, the consequences of which he himself almost certainly failed to assess properly. It is unlikely, however, that another secretary could have done much better, unless he had been capable of completely rethinking the role of the PNF and managing to get Mussolini and Ciano to accept it. This was practically impossible for the former, but also for the latter, who remembered the party only when he deemed it useful for his personal political agenda, but who, the rest of the time, regarded it merely as a den of old fascists who thought they could use it for their own power-seeking ends—ends he considered "petty" or antithetical to his own—so that, ultimately, he wanted anything but its revitalization.

The most positive aspect of the late-October cabinet reshuffle turned out to be the appointment of Alessandro Pavolini as Minister of Popular Culture. Much more intelligent and dynamic than Alfieri—and, unlike him, quite the opposite

210 In addition to the monitoring of the implementation of welfare measures, employers often complained about the propaganda activities carried out by the PNF within factories in the major industrial centers. In a report dated February 20, 1940, from the U.S. Consul in Turin, Richard B. Haven, to Ambassador Phillips, this issue is noted not only in reference to the economic damage (work stoppages) that industrialists claimed to have suffered, but also to the "moral" damage, because such activities "usually created a psychological complex of superiority in the minds of the workers that did not subside until some time had passed" (ASAE, General Secretariat, p. 263). This report, like others from foreign diplomats in Italy that we will cite in the following pages, is preserved in the Foreign Ministry's archives because it came into the possession of the Italian secret services and was forwarded by them to the appropriate authorities.

Although he had German leanings (though it must be noted that by September 1, Alfieri had aligned himself with the policy of "non-intervention" as conceived by Ciano 2"), and was closely tied to Ciano, the Pavolini of '39–'40 had nothing in common with the fanatical extremist who would head the secretariat of the Republican Fascist Party in '43–'45- Especially in the early months, his actions perfectly complemented those of Ciano; later—when the divergence in positions between Mussolini and his son-in-law became more pronounced—he aligned himself with Mussolini, who, during the final period of "non-belligerence," apparently considered Pavolini the most efficient and reliable of his collaborators 212 and had to confide in him on more than one occasion, sharing with him not only his worries and outbursts, but also his plans for the future 2,3; yet this did not lead Pavolini to break with Ciano, whose efforts to keep Italy out of the conflict he remained a staunch supporter of until the fall of France. Under Pavolini's control, the press—especially the daily newspapers— radio, and the LUCE newsreels generally supported Mussolini's and Ciano's policies well and intelligently during these months, striving, as far as possible, to bolster them in the eyes of Westerners and neutral nations, without offering the Germans any glaring pretexts for protests or interference, and succeeding in exerting a significant influence in controlling and shaping national public opinion.

Alfieri was particularly concerned about the repercussions abroad2,4

211 In his report to newspaper editors on September 29, 1939, Alfieri went so far as to say: "The situation is becoming increasingly serious and increasingly delicate; serious even from our point of view, because we are still part of the Axis, but… things are changing" (ACS, Agenzia Stefani, Manlio Morgagni, b. 5, file 12).

213 In this regard, some of Pavolini's references in his reports to journalists to typical Mussolini-style arguments from these months—which can only be explained by his close ties to the "Duce"—are highly telling. Consider these two examples. In his report of February 1, 1940, he spoke of the new direction of Italy's military preparations, emphasizing that they were no longer aimed, as they had been until the previous year, at creating a mass army of millions of men, but rather at a numerically relatively small yet heavily armed force. In his report of February 22, he then clearly referred (though without using the term) to Mussolini's idea of the "parallel war." "In the mindset—let's say, so to speak—of each of you," he said, "I ask you to consider that a European crisis is underway, one that involves all belligerent and non-belligerent nations. Within this vast crisis, various wars are taking shape, not just a single war. One that need not be mentioned because it is on everyone's mind; another, the Finnish war, with its own characteristics and autonomy. Into this landscape, our own war could emerge tomorrow—one that may or may not be linked, in whole or in part, to the wars of others, but which will have its own aims and objectives. Therefore, our mindset is not to ask ourselves, "Are we on this side or that side?" but rather, "We have certain interests that we will pursue sooner or later." Yet, on a case-by-case basis, our perspective must be grounded in our own interests. "So, practically all of our demands are along the lines you are aware of, but on other fronts there are probabilities or possibilities of taking actions that only partially coincide with the interests of others—actions that sometimes coincide with the interests of one side or the other, and sometimes, finally, with the interests of both sides" (ACS, Agenzia Stefani, Manlio Morgagni, b. 5, file 12).

2.4 "At this moment, the newspapers must be concerned above all with the repercussions abroad of what is printed in Italy..." Report by D. Alfieri dated September 12, 1939 (ibid.).

and had essentially focused on two objectives: to project the image of an Italy that did not take sides with either of the two parties in the conflict 2.5, and to emphasize the possibilities for a negotiated peace that still existed, as well as Mussolini's full willingness to facilitate its realization. Pavolini adhered strictly to the first directive: the stance toward the belligerents had to be "as balanced as possible," and he maintained this stance until around March, when he gradually began to give priority to pro-German sources of information and commentary, while continuing to publish war bulletins and major news items from Anglo-French sources; but he supplemented it by adding two further guidelines to Alfieri's instructions: never to waver from the anti-democratic and anti-Bolshevik characterization of the Fascist position, and to remain flexible and adaptable toward all countries—belligerent or not—so as not to risk finding themselves in difficulty or contradicting themselves. A typical example is the opening of the report he delivered to newspaper editors on November 25:[217]

In the face of the succession of events, our fundamental stance remains, in essence, unchanged. However, given all the factors at play, and

215 In the early months of the war, this "impartial" stance was maintained not only by virtually the entire daily press (among the most significant exceptions worth noting are *Regime fascista* and, above all, *Il Tevere*, which were ardently pro-German), but also by a large portion of the more politically committed periodicals aimed primarily at party cadres. A case in point is the conclusion of Erba's lengthy article, "August 1939," with which *Civiltà fascista*, the official organ of the National Institute of Fascist Culture, commented in its September–October issue (pp. 775 ff.) on the outbreak of the conflict: "The controversy over responsibility for the war began immediately after hostilities broke out. The intent behind this debate—staged and sustained by the respective propaganda offices to influence public opinion in all countries, including the belligerents—is obvious; however, for those indifferent to these immediate aims, the futility of such trials, which one might wish to bring before the

tribunal of History, is plain. What good does it do to prove that the German government wanted the war simply to satisfy its demands on Poland? What good does it do to prove that England waited for the escalation of force—which it itself had compelled—to drag the Reich into a conflict that would have been hopeless for it: just as the shrewd hunter scatters easy prey along the path leading the intended victim to the trap where he awaits with patient cunning?

“One might say: Germany provoked the war; but it was England that wanted Germany to be forced into it. It will then be up to whichever of the two emerges victorious from the struggle to prove that the other was at fault. This is how yesterday’s Versailles trial was conducted, and this is how tomorrow’s Versailles trial will be conducted—if it ever comes to that. This is why the war was waged: to prove that the opposing side was solely responsible for the European crisis; this is why both contenders want to secure victory: to punish the guilty party. What would be the point of determining responsibility for the war today, if the war itself was willed—like a judgment of God—to discredit and punish the guilty party?”

216 See, for example, the instructions given by Pavolini to journalists in the report of April 15, 1940 (ibid.): “In general commentary articles, which must be oriented in the aforementioned direction, avoid anything that might appear to be insinuations—even if made only to be denied immediately afterward—and which are immediately picked up by British propaganda. However, as for news reports, give priority to German sources and to dispatches from Berlin or other neutral sources, if favorable. Then, regarding Anglo-French bulletins: if they confirm what is stated in the German bulletin, this should be noted; or if they report on actions that, according to their account, are favorable to them, then we, in headlining these reports, should highlight that, according to the Anglo-French sources, this episode allegedly occurred, though it is not confirmed by the German side. “If there is agreement and the matter is favorable to Germany, we will, of course, report the news.”

That is, not only with regard to the belligerents but also to other countries that may, in any case, fall within the scope of our policy, it would be wise for us to adopt a more flexible mindset. We must realize that when dealing with this or that belligerent group, or with nations such as Russia, etc., our stance cannot become rigidly fixed along an unchanging line; our stance may change depending on how our interests align with each power at any given moment. To explain myself better: with Russia, we may be at loggerheads in one area and—I’m not saying friends, which would be impossible—but in a relationship based on a possible common interest in another area.

It follows, therefore, that our confrontational, resolute, and clear stances—in keeping with the Fascist style—must not, however, be entirely uniform. In short, let us avoid overly rigid stances and overly absolute statements.

Unlike Alfieri, from the very beginning of his tenure as minister, Pavolini did nothing but urge extreme caution when discussing peace initiatives that no one showed any real desire to pursue. And in March *402,8, he even forbade any discussion of the matter:

A firm principle is not to speak of peace. In this regard, in fact, there is no need even to say that we want to discuss it; let us simply not discuss it. Therefore, even when referring to actions on other fronts, it is one thing to say that we are acting to maintain a balance, but it is quite another to say that we are acting to promote peace. In fact, since there is no likelihood that peace will “break out,” it is absolutely ridiculous to direct Italy’s actions toward a goal that cannot be achieved. Therefore, under no circumstances should we create public expectations of peace or even the impression that Italy is about to enter the war. This possibility should not be ruled out in any way, but we must not rush the process

or create tensions that would serve only to fray nerves without, moreover, contributing to the rebuilding of public morale that we must pursue.

And with this, we have arrived at what was the guiding principle of all of Pavolini's efforts: to focus primarily on the domestic front to contain and combat the "fluctuations" and "deviations" that occurred between the end of August and the first half of September, stemming from fears of entering the war, and to "gradually raise the temperature of the Italian people." This was to be achieved by a) highlighting in every way Mussolini's "careful" and "responsible" work[2]; b) emphasizing to the utmost the extreme

2.9 Ibid., report to journalists on February 22, 1940: "I ask you to focus your attention on the fact that everything being done in Italy at present—and something truly monumental is being done, both to counter the economic blockade that is tightening around us as much as it does around the belligerents, and often more so, and to arm Italy and put it in a position to effectively have its say at the decisive moment, as well as to maintain this miraculous balance and to meet the need to keep the fighting spirit of Italy's younger generations high while simultaneously pursuing a policy of balance and patience—all of this, needless to say, bears Mussolini's unmistakable mark. The more solitary and silent this action of his is, the more truly heroic and demanding it becomes. Therefore, in whatever ways your sensitivity, your discretion, and at the same time your precise sense as Fascists suggest, place under the seal of the Leader's initiative all that work which you are carrying out in your columns and which stems directly from his person and his ongoing efforts."

the gravity of the moment and the difficulties it entailed in the lives of all nations; c) emphasizing and devoting space not so much to war and international events (except in specific cases such as the Finnish-Soviet War, which we will discuss later) as to the civil and social commitment of Fascist policy in all sectors of national and colonial life (a typical example is the great attention that the press, radio, and LUCE newsreels gave during these months to the work undertaken in Sicily for the "struggle against large estates," to the E 42 project, and to the launch of the Reggio Emilia–Adriatic canalization project), so as to indirectly highlight its peaceful intentions and justify its limitations with the difficulties of the moment; d) fostering an attitude not of sympathy for one of the belligerents, but of antipathy and hostility toward the other, drawing on both the "historical" reasons for such hostility and the current ones—specifically, the British naval blockade ("which strangles us and harms us day by day"); e) avoiding the impression that war is imminent or that there is popular demand for war, because this phase would then be followed by a lull, thereby causing nervous exhaustion; on the contrary, to convey the sense that we are ready, that we are preparing intensively, and to foster a growing awareness of the Italian interests at stake in the great game being played out in Europe, implying that from this game—which will reshape the map of Europe and the continents—we will emerge with our problems resolved and with ample room for us 22."

And in these efforts, it must be said that Pavolini knew how to proceed with skill and intelligence ("guide the public with logic and persuasion, so that gradually the mood returns to what it was," he always repeated), preventing contradictory statements and avoiding both rhetoric and an overly blatant denial of the truth[221] as well as overly aggressive forms of denunciation (à la Starace), and therefore

221 "Tomorrow morning, too, the newspapers will lead with news about the price freeze and wage increases. This is news that concerns 45 million Italians and therefore deserves priority over all other news.

"In the commentaries that may be more widespread tomorrow (given the time that has elapsed since the

Corporate Committee meeting) than those of today—and which may also recur in the coming days—we must always start from the premise of the general economic war in which we, too, are engaged; and when discussing both the activities of the corporate bodies and the personal actions of the Duce, we must never speak of decisive action but rather of action that addresses these problems as they arise, without expecting such action to be decisive once and for all.

"The first point to consider (very well documented in Minister Ricci's report) is the widespread nature of price increases in all countries around the world. Ricci has provided figures that are absolutely conclusive. It must be said, of course, that a price increase here was inevitable, and one should not claim that it was slight. Unfortunately, there was a publication (for which the newspapers are not to blame, since it was taken from a report on the Chamber of Deputies' budget) stating that the increase in Italy had been 7.50%. Naturally, people calculate based on the amounts they spend on living expenses and realize that the index is much higher. The Duce clearly referred to this when he said that official prices should be brought into line with market prices, because it is pointless for the Provincial Councils of Corporate Economy to set counterproductive "indicative" prices—examples of the "defeatism" that we sought to combat. Typical in this regard is the following passage from his report to journalists on January 25, 1940, p. 222:

One issue that must be tackled head-on starting tomorrow morning is a certain degree of defeatism and a certain minor, marginal panic that has arisen in the wake of the ration card registration: first regarding the distribution of food ration cards and then regarding sugar ration card registration.

That people grumble a little about these measures is a phenomenon of such a nature that it should not be cause for concern, and therefore there is no need to crack down on it. But when people—especially in certain segments of the middle class rather than among the working class—resort to hoarding and fail to take into account the reality of the market, then when discussing inevitable price increases, we must refer to actual market prices and not to official price lists, which reflect the reality of the situation only to a certain extent.

"That said, it is also worth noting that, in many cases, the increase in Italian prices has indeed been lower than that observed elsewhere; yet in many other cases, the Italian price is higher than the corresponding world price—which can be calculated based on the average of prices elsewhere. This occurs because the so-called autarkic price—which a product acquires by being produced under an autarkic system—is in no way comparable to the world price. There are products that we produce with great difficulty, that cost us a great deal, and that we could not otherwise obtain for a myriad of reasons. Therefore, certain prices that may seem extremely high as autarkic production prices are actually the lowest possible, given the impossibility of procuring these products in any other way.

"This covers the background to this morning's prices.

"Once prices had reached a certain level—driven by the irrepressible force of necessity and the very close connection between our economic conditions and global economic conditions—it was nevertheless necessary to freeze those prices for a certain period; otherwise, any adjustment to wages and salaries would have been pointless."

"In this regard, I ask you to commend the Italian workers—and Italian workers in general—for the understanding they have shown. They were by no means enthusiastic about these increases in wages and salaries, because they realized that if these increases were not accompanied by a halt to rising prices, they would merely serve as a new impetus for further price hikes.

“There has indeed been genuine understanding among the public, and the newspapers, through calm and well-reasoned arguments, are called upon to deepen this understanding among the public.

“ ” Which types of goods and services were subject to the price freeze? Certain goods and services essential to daily life—that is, those affecting all citizens. Naturally, it was not possible to regulate the prices of all luxury goods. It must be considered that the complaints often heard—which refer to goods said to have seen price increases of up to 100%—typically come from people who use items that are not at all used by the general public. But the point here is not to chase after these outliers; the point is to ensure that the prices of essential goods remain at their current levels, not least because freezing these prices has a beneficial effect on prices in other sectors not taken into account.

“ The price increases that have occurred from September to the present have naturally affected consumers. The price freeze established through July will evidently affect some, but no longer the consumer—rather, all links in the production chain. This is because the impact is not intended to fall solely on the final link—that is, the retailer—but rather partly on the retailer, partly on the wholesaler, and partly on the producer. And it is precisely for this reason that we appeal to all production and commercial sectors.

“ In the price increases that have occurred so far, speculation has naturally played a role, but let it be clear that while this is an important phenomenon, it is a marginal one. The bulk of the price increase was unavoidable, and therefore, looking ahead (as the Corporate Committee’s motion has highlighted), we must combat any attempt to deviate from the established norm; at the same time, the norm itself and the discipline that will undoubtedly be achieved are far more important than this marginal deviation.

“ Finally, the increases as they occur (and you will report on them as agreements between the labor unions are reached) should not be presented as some sort of handout from the Regime or its associations or bodies in favor of workers, but as an indispensable adjustment to maintain the standard of living of workers and laborers in general at a tolerable level.

When this hoarding takes on absurd forms (as with butter, eggs, and even soap), then action must be taken.

Make a few jibes and also issue some very specific warnings to the effect that the law against hoarders may once again become relevant, especially since it is well known who the hoarders are.

If a few names come up, that’s not unwelcome. I’m referring to the *Corriere Padano*, which hinted at the bigwigs.

I’ve seen that there’s been a debate over whether or not to name names. Names, if necessary, must be named. And besides, naming someone in the newspapers can be more effective.

In August and September, what Pavolini euphemistically called “fluctuations” and “deviations”— that is, fear of war and hostility toward the alliance with Germany, were widespread throughout almost the entire country—so much so that, as we have seen, even Mussolini, while downplaying them, had spoken explicitly about them in his speeches to the leadership in Bologna and Genoa, and there are various more or less explicit references to them that can be found in the Fascist press 223. And they had been far more widespread than the regime was willing to admit. Even if he may have been exaggerating for good reason, it is certainly no coincidence that on August 30, Bocchini, speaking with Ciano 224,

went so far as to not rule out that, “in the event of a neutralist uprising,” the Carabinieri and police officers might make “common cause with the people.” Even more telling is that even Starace, on August 16, had admitted “that when Germany attacks Poland, we will have to keep our eyes wide open to prevent public anti-German demonstrations” 225. All police reports from those weeks agree in documenting this fear and hostility, often in great detail and in tones that reveal that even the writers themselves shared the same state of mind. A prime example is this report dated Rome, August 26, 1939:

Fear of the outbreak of war is now widespread and general; but it is further fueled by certain newspaper headlines which, instead of fostering calm anticipation, are spreading alarmism. In fact, as early as the 23rd of this month, the *Lavoro Fascista*—which excels in sensationalist headlines—gave the impression that war was about to break out inexorably, while today, five days later, it remains in abeyance. Certainly, if it were not for this particular newspaper—in which Casini, the Director of the Italian Press at the Ministry of Popular Culture, has direct and indirect interests—it would already have been seized.

223 Tipico C. Pellizzi, “Sbandati e dispersi,” in *Critica fascista*, October 1, 1939, pp. 364 ff., in which we read: “In times of crisis, many good people fall back under the influence of old sentiments and passions, lose touch with the guiding principles they had professed for years—whether in good or bad faith—and dust off old grudges, resentments, and nostalgia. In private conversations and, often, here and there, between the lines of some newspaper, you see a sampling of old ideas peeking through—ideas that, amid the great, unanimous, and all too loudly unanimous chorus of just a few days earlier, you might have believed were buried and forgotten.”

Conversely, the conduct of the authorities in general—and above all the lack of significant preparations for war—keeps people’s spirits still clinging to a glimmer of hope, all the more so because the Duce’s silence suggests that he still has a few cards to play before resorting to war. The people place their trust in him and in his level-headed judgment, in his patriotism—which seems incapable of leading the nation to total ruin, as totalitarian doctrine holds would occur in the event of war, whatever the outcome—and they are entirely opposed to war in general and to this particular war in particular, since they see no benefit in it. This is all the more true in Northern Italy, where I am assured from many quarters that people are entirely opposed to a war fought alongside Germany. I myself have heard—words that reflect the people’s sentiment—from some conscripts who say they will go wherever they are sent, but as for actually fighting, that remains to be seen: and it would be easier to surrender as prisoners. For hatred toward the Germans has by no means died down, and even if no one were to desert because of it, there is good reason to believe that if Italian and German troops were to come into contact, some internal skirmishes would be expected—especially at night, when officers are unable to keep a close watch on the troops. In any case, it would be prudent to keep the two groups apart to avoid trouble. On the other hand, the officers’ concern is also to justify the war—if there were one—in some way to the troops, to whom one cannot present a subtle and abstract line of reasoning. During the Great War, it was easy and understandable to speak of Trento and Trieste; today, one certainly cannot say that we are waging war to hand Danzig over to Germany… nor that Tunis is worth such enormous upheaval. Now it is difficult for an officer to command obedience when he must lead hundreds of men to the slaughter for… something that is neither known nor justifiable. This is the line of reasoning I have heard expressed by a great many people. And even those who, in a moment of weariness and near-despair, claim that it would be better for the conflict to break out quickly rather than face such uncertainty—they say this merely to vent their frustration, but in essence, everyone is opposed to the conflict itself. However, as I was saying, until there is official news of hostilities, no one will be convinced, and everyone is hoping for the Duce’s wisdom: for if he were unable to avert disaster, he would suffer an immense loss of public trust.

Once the war broke out and “non-belligerence” was proclaimed, part of the conscripts (the class of 1902) were demobilized, and certain restrictions introduced around September 1—including blackouts—were lifted; this state of mind had eased somewhat but was certainly not quelled. The government reshuffle in late October and Starace’s replacement had given many hope that the country was on the eve of a transition from “non-belligerence” to pure and simple neutrality, but these hopes were dashed by the bland communiqué issued after the Grand Council meeting on December 7, which was expected to formally establish full neutrality. However, the fact that, at the same time, the PNF and the entire press insisted on the uncompromisingly anti-Bolshevik nature of fascism[227] and that the regime’s sympathies lay with Finland, which had been attacked by the USSR

227 Apart from a very brief moment, immediately after the conclusion of the German-Soviet Pact, during which—partly out of surprise, partly out of admiration for “the masterstroke” pulled off by the Germans in wresting the USSR away from its now-taken-for-granted alliance with the Franco-British, and partly out of joy—had reached the point of manifesting itself not only through the unanimous stance of the press but even by allowing student demonstrations to take place in various cities and permitting the enlistment of volunteers willing to go and fight in defense of Finland 228—had kept alive among some Italians the hope that Mussolini was preparing the ground to break away from Germany 229. Seeing the ideological justification for the war against the Axis powers “fail”—and above all, hoping that the pact, by reversing the balance of power and thwarting attempts to encircle Germany, might prevent the outbreak of the conflict (see V. Gayda, “The Bitter Surprise,” in *Il Giornale d’Italia*, August 23, 1939; id., “Off Course,” ibid., August 24, 1939; “The Reversed Situation,” in *Il Popolo d’Italia*, August 23, 1939; G. Polverelli, “Untangling the Knots,” ibid., August 24, 1939; G. Ansaldo, “The End of the Encirclement,” in *Il Telegrafo*, August 23, 1939; “Catastrophe of the Plutocracies,” in *Il Regime Fascista*, August 23, 1939; “No Room for Misunderstandings,” ibid., August 25, 1939), Germany’s policy of friendship with the USSR was viewed—with very rare and insignificant exceptions (see, for example, D. Fiorelli, “Italy, Germany, and Russia at the Vanguard of Global Renewal,” in *La Verità*, September 1939, pp. 352 ff.), by the Fascist press throughout the entire period of “non-belligerence” in more or less openly critical terms and with a constant emphasis on the anti-Bolshevik character of Fascism. A typical example is the editorial in *Critica Fascista*, “Justice in Europe,” of October 13, 1939, pp. 378 ff., which states: “Looking solely at the balance of power, one may resort to desperate measures, such as when England and France sought to ally themselves with Russia, or when Germany succeeded in doing so; desperate measures, because they consist of invoking powers that one might ultimately fail to control.” Even Preziosi’s *La vita italiana*, which was clearly pro-Nazi, did not fail to emphasize that the German-Soviet Pact, by giving priority to realistic considerations over ideological ones, had created “a situation that, spiritually speaking, is anything but clear” (J. Evola, “Le idee e il conflitto attuale,” ibid., October 1939, p. 419). Perhaps the clearest position, however, was taken by F. Coppola, “Momenti della lotta politica, I: L’avanzata bolscevica,” in *Politica*, March 1940, pp. 281 ff., who bluntly accused Germany (and England and France for their failed attempts at an agreement with Moscow) of having “played into the hands of Bolshevik barbarism—that is, of Anti-Civilization, in a word, of Anti-Europe”—and of having “opened the heart of Europe to Bolshevik Russia” and harshly criticized those in Italy who saw—or wanted to see—a USSR that, “having set itself on the path of a new imperialist nationalism,” was “gradually abandoning its Bolshevik mystique, losing or diluting its anti-European barbaric virus.” The targets of Coppola’s polemic were certainly Bombacci’s *La verità*, but probably also certain articles that appeared in *Gerarchia*, which were not explicitly hostile to the USSR (distinguishing between the Soviet state and Bolshevism) and sometimes tended to argue that the Soviet regime was transforming and moving closer to “fascist conclusions” (see, in particular, F. Chilanti, “Stalin Against Democracy,” ibid., October 1939, pp. 692 ff., but also, in the December issue

of the same journal, pp. 776 ff., M. Rivoire's polemical reply to Chilanti—though without naming him—titled "Fascism Against 'Commonplace Notions': Our Anti-Bolshevism"). The most bitter phase of the anti-Soviet (and often, indirectly, anti-German) polemic coincided with the Finnish-Soviet conflict, during which the entire fascist press sided with Finland, frequently using extremely heated language, to the point of prompting the recall of the Soviet ambassador to Rome. See M. Toscano, *A Failed Italian-Soviet Agreement in 1940 and 1941*, Florence 1953, pp. 13 ff.

2M Concern over the possible consequences of these hopes and the "speculation" they gave rise to is evident in various reports Pavolini sent to journalists. A typical example is this passage from his report to the editors dated December 7, 1939: "Our stance is clear: sympathy. However, this struggle, which is far removed from us, cannot continue to be—if it drags on—a central focus of the foreign news sections of newspapers. In this regard as well, balance and moderation are needed, bearing in mind that, when it comes to heroism, what interests us most is our own heroism. Above all, we must bear in mind that certain attitudes have lent themselves to tendentious speculation, not only abroad but also at home—specifically within Catholic circles, where a tendency has emerged, in connection with the case of Finland, to condemn en masse all instances of the occupation of other countries, and implicitly ventures such as those in Ethiopia and Albania: a tendency that we are determined to stamp out." (ACS, Agenzia Stefani, Manlio Morgagni, b. 5, file 12).

229 With regard to the spread of a certain sentiment that led some Italians to consider the danger of involvement in the conflict now averted, the opening of an article by G. Granzotto, "Essere Italiani," in *Critica fascista*, December 1, 1939, p. 36: "After the initial alarms and confusion—which were, in any case, limited in number and duration—once Italy's official position regarding the conflict had been clarified, we witnessed, and continue to witness, an excessive, unjustified optimism circulating in various sectors of Italian life. We did not welcome the war, but the masses harbored few illusions about Mussolini's intentions, and relatively few people placed their hopes in a decisive intervention by the king. The most widespread belief was that if Mussolini had not yet intervened in the conflict, it was solely due to Italy's utter military unpreparedness; but that, sooner or later—barring a compromise peace, in which few believed, or a resounding Anglo-French victory—he would lead Italy into the war. Yet, until the conflict spread to Norway and Denmark—which first fueled hopes and then fears 230 during the winter months—Italy remained an outsider to this war; and the desire for peace, which is natural and instinctive among every working people, settled into this conviction that had been reached all too easily and superficially."

230 A firsthand account of the state of mind—particularly among the middle class—brought about by the resumption of hostilities in early spring 1940 is provided by the following report from the British consul in Turin, dated April 16, to the ambassador in Rome (ASAE, General Secretariat, p. 257): "The events of the past week have been followed here with the utmost attention.

"In September, the people were apathetic, resigned—after so many crises—to the possible inevitability of war, clinging only to the hope, which has so far been realized, that Italy would be kept out of it. Today the atmosphere is very different. The intellectual and well-informed segment of the public is eager for accurate news and shows considerable enthusiasm—albeit perhaps somewhat restrained—for the Allied cause. To use a childish expression, one might say that they are 'thumbing their thumbs up' for the Allies.

"2. It is not easy to describe this attitude precisely. It is certainly not based on an unshakable confidence in an Allied victory. The Italian press and radio, which have probably never been as pro-German as they are now, have taken it upon themselves to report on this, and German exploits in Scandinavia—

regarding the success or failure of which the average Italian cannot form his own opinion—are viewed with wonder and a certain involuntary admiration. Rather, there is a deep, desperate, almost frantic hope that the Allies will inflict a crushing defeat on the Germans in the near future—a defeat which, they believe, could definitively sever Italy's alliance with Germany.

"The Italian people have become accustomed, over the past few years, to the resounding successes and exploits of dictatorships, especially Hitler's, and believe that, to safeguard their prestige in the world, the Allies must achieve an equally immediate and resounding success.

"3. I will give a few examples of public reactions that I have observed myself or that have been reported to me by my staff. Last Tuesday, and especially on Wednesday and Thursday mornings, several people came to the Consulate to ask if we had any official and authoritative news. Unfortunately, we could only repeat what we had heard on the radio that morning. But these questions —and the comments that accompanied them—were made in an office crowded with people, and very often in the presence of strangers to those speaking, who made no effort to hide their true feelings. One visitor called out to Consul Gallo across the room in English, "God bless the old fleet," while another said, "Finally, the British have woken up." On Thursday morning, an Italian man unknown to us here at the consulate came in and asked if he could write a note to leave with me. He was given what he needed, and as soon as he left, his note was brought to me. In it, he wrote that "with all his heart" he hoped for an Allied victory—a hope shared by every honest, right-thinking Italian—and that he also hoped that Italy and England would soon be united on the path to peace and justice. He ended his note by asking me to accept "a modest donation" for the British Red Cross and enclosed a 100-lire note. He signed, "One who fought at the Piave."

"4. Among my friends and acquaintances, I have heard similar reflections, and in the privacy of my office or at my home, they do not hesitate to express their feelings.

"The owner of the garage where I keep my car never fails to do this when he sees me, while a young man, a 'messenger' at a commercial firm in the same building as the Consulate, whenever I meet him in the entrance or on the stairs, often asks me for news and positively seethes with hatred when he speaks of the Germans, 'those beasts.'

"5. Another friend, an Italian doctor, greeted me yesterday by saying, 'I'd like to strangle the British; no one wants an Allied victory more than I do, but why do you always let the Germans get there before you? Czechoslovakia, Poland, Finland (because it was the same back then too), and now Norway and Denmark. The neutrals cannot rely on the guarantees given by the Allies—the Germans always get there first." "I tried to point out that if we 'got there first,' we would be playing into the Germans' hands, but he wouldn't listen to reason. He insisted that any action taken by the Allies against Germany, even if it meant passing through neutral territories, would be welcomed with enthusiasm by the neutrals themselves. "The great advantage dictatorships have is that they can make immediate decisions. In Paris and London, you have to consult among yourselves, then with one another, before you can act. You waste precious time and all your opportunities." "But despite all this, the impression remains that Italy's future political actions will be decided based on the Allies' success in the North, and public opinion is now becoming seriously unsettled by the great efforts made by the Italian press to exaggerate and glorify German victories and to downplay those of the Allies, and many people are wondering about the meaning of a radio broadcast yesterday dedicated to the armed forces, in which troops were warned not to believe that war can be avoided, but instead to reflect, upon waking each morning, 'If not today, it may be tomorrow or next week.' On the other hand, according to rumors circulating, it seems that work is being carried out day and night on the Brenner fortifications. The public no longer

understands anything and is very uneasy." "Day by day, Italians' confidence in Germany's 'invincible' military power is being shaken. When the peace treaty between Russia and Finland was signed, general Italian opinion held that the war would soon be over, since the Allies had lost their best opportunity following the Finnish-Russian peace, which constituted a defeat for them. "But now the majority of Italians are convinced of England's 'unshakable resolve' to wage the war to a victorious conclusion. "Many believed at the beginning that the war could not last long, but now everyone is talking about 3–4 years! "There is still a small percentage of Italians, especially among the common people, who maintain that in the end there will be neither winners nor losers. "Many hopes for a German victory have faded; some mock German propaganda, others curse and rail against Hitler, and people who listen to the radio prefer to tune in to French stations rather than German ones—especially the Toulouse station, which offers excellent programming; moreover, when the Toulouse station broadcasts in Italian, the German stations try to jam the signal. People prefer to listen to the French stations because their language is better understood by the majority of Italians than English."

Although it remained palpable, the tension eased somewhat, despite a whole series of events (the introduction of rationing for certain goods such as sugar and coffee, the growing scarcity of others, such as coal and soap, rising prices, the requisitioning of iron from fences, etc.) signaled a worsening of living conditions for the population and made clear the direction in which Mussolini's policies were heading. Certainly, the prevailing sentiment was clearly anti-German (especially in certain areas of the North and among the middle class), and there was a very keen interest in news from Western sources (hence the sharp increase, during these months, in the listening to foreign radio stations broadcasting in Italian—particularly Radio London, Toulouse, and Monteceneri[231]—and in the circulation of the *Osservatore Romano*); especially in some large cities, where the problems of daily life were more all-consuming 232, the prolonged stalemate in military operations during the winter nevertheless led to a slight—but for the regime highly significant—phenomenon of acclimatization to the situation and a certain diminishing of the fear of an imminent Italian intervention, which, among a minority but not insignificant portion of the population, was accompanied by a more or less unconscious attitude of criticism toward France and England, which were alternately accused of excessive intransigence and a lack of understanding toward Italy, of seeking to starve it, and of failing to rise to the challenge they had undertaken. This explains why, during these months, overt expressions of dissent were rare, sporadic, and by no means sufficient to either trouble the regime or spur further protests. In practice, there were only a few instances of leaflets being distributed in support of the monarchy and the army—and thus against the regime (as in March in Palermo, where leaflets bearing the slogan "Rise up, the army is with you" 233 were distributed in some markets and a movie theater)—and some unrest over rationing or the scarcity of certain basic necessities.

With regard to the Roman intellectual milieu, see instead J. Carcopino, *Souvenirs de sept ans*, op. cit., pp. 41 ff. and passim.

Nor did this state of mind concern only non-Fascists or the so-called "card-carrying Fascists." There are numerous accounts, from both Fascist and foreign sources, attesting that it was alive and well even in broad sectors of true Fascism. Here, for example, is what the U.S. Consul in Naples reported to his embassy in Rome on April 10, 1940 (ASAE, General Secretariat, p. 257): "I recently had the opportunity to speak with members of the Fascist Party whom I had known for a long time as enthusiastic supporters of the regime and the Duce, and I was quite surprised to hear them make

remarks that indicated a complete change in their ideas and opinions. These people were among the regime's staunchest supporters and very favorable toward its general policy; they had an unshakable faith in the Duce's decisions. From the way they expressed their feelings, I could tell that they are now very frustrated with the situation in general.

"They have declared that they have had enough of all these successive wars: first Abyssinia, then Spain, then Albania, and now a million soldiers are being kept under arms, causing an enormous expense that must be paid for by the taxpayer.

"They say that poverty is on the rise without this so-called 'Empire' yielding any profit. They complain that since 1922, the Duce has been dragging the nation along without granting it either rest or the time to work and earn a living in peace.

"Every so often, people are called up for military service, then discharged, then called up again for some new reason, so that they no longer have the chance to devote themselves to steady work.

"Of course, I've heard this said thousands of times and still hear it said daily, but I was surprised to hear it from people like these, whom I had always known as fervent and devoted Fascists who never criticized the regime.

"They do not come from the common people, since the latter generally have no opinions of their own but merely repeat what they hear; rather, they belong to a high-ranking, intellectual class—men who have received a good education: doctors, lawyers, engineers.

"The strange thing is that some time ago, while other people were complaining, these men kept talking about all the good the Duce had done for Italy.

"Now all the good is forgotten, or openly ignored, and only the bad side of things is apparent to them."

There were undoubtedly many reasons for this popular attitude. We have already touched on some of them—in particular, the growing acceptance and the spread of the idea that, for the time being, the danger of intervention had at least been postponed. Another reason was the absence of voices—and even more so, of openly dissenting initiatives and acts of resistance—due to the profound crisis facing organized anti-fascism, which had by then been largely and completely disrupted byrepressive actions carried out in previous years by the police; it had been reduced to small groups of militants with no connections to one another or to their headquarters abroad 234, and had been annihilated and torn apart from within (so much so that at the outbreak of the war it had not even been able to publish a unified manifesto against it) by the trauma of the German-Soviet Pact. Thus, the only political initiative of any significance (though it met with no response) was the letter written to the king by Sforza on May 30, urging him to oppose Italy's participation in the conflict 235. Another such initiative was the skill and intelligence with which Bocchini utilized the regime's repressive apparatus in this difficult situation: maintaining the most meticulous and widespread surveillance, yet intervening only in the few most serious cases and with the utmost discretion, so as not to provide new fuel for popular discontent and to prevent the spread of the impression that an opposition movement existed, as well as the emergence of mass hysteria and copycat behavior. That said, it must also be noted that the skill with which Pavolini steered the media during these months played a significant role in shaping this situation, on the one hand, reinforcing the idea that there was no danger of an imminent Italian intervention, and, on the

other, to some extent acclimating at least a portion of Italians to the notion that, in the end, participation in the conflict would be inevitable—not only because Mussolini wanted it, but also because it was being imposed on Italy by the Anglo-French, the scale of the conflict, and the stakes involved. All of these factors were certainly not enough to make the majority accept the idea of participating in the war—and, moreover, alongside Germany—but, in the absence of genuine alternative voices and in the presence of a certain underlying cultural mindset—partly of a traditional patriotic nature, partly the result of years of fascist indoctrination and propaganda—and in a situation of wartime stagnation such as the one that

231 Radio London broadcasts would shortly be jammed "using all means at the disposal of the Ministry of the Interior at the RT Centers in Rome, Bari, Bologna, Bolzano, Florence, Genoa, Messina, Palermo, Turin, Trieste, and Venice." See the note to the Duce on this matter in ACS, Ministry of Popular Culture, b. 11, file 154, as well as M. Piccialuti Caprioli, *Radio Londra 1939–1945* (Bari, 1979), pp. 31 ff.

232 The following remark is typical of the aforementioned report by the U.S. consul in Turin dated February 20, 1940 (ASAE, General Secretariat, p. 263): "As for the population of Turin, it seems to be rather preoccupied with its own local issues, leaving the war to the other countries across the border."

235 See C. Sforza, *Italy from 1914 to 1944 as I Saw It*, Verona 1946, pp. 194 ff. Earlier, on September 15, 1939, Nitti had written a rather unusual letter to Mussolini, in which he advocated Italy's entry into the war alongside France and England, but urged the "Duce" not to repeat "the mistakes of 1915" and to "negotiate in due course" with them for substantial economic assistance and adequate territorial concessions in Africa and Asia. See F. S. Nitti, *Scritti politici*, VI, Bari 1963, pp. 600 ff.

that occurred in the West with the so-called "drôle de guerre" were precisely capable of creating a state of less vigilant and tense anticipation—almost one of torpor and, at times, confusion.

And while this was undoubtedly a major success for the regime—which was thus able to overcome its most difficult moment and which, potentially, could have had unpredictable consequences both for its internal cohesion and, therefore, for its very stability (since, as noted, the regime could only be thrown into crisis from within its own components and through the breakdown of their balances)— as well as for Mussolini's position and, in particular, for his freedom of action, 236 it was, at the same time—and here the internal contradiction and the fragility of its policy are revealed—a very serious blow to the anti-German and anti-war party and, first and foremost, to Ciano, because the more internal tension eased, the more difficult it became for the party to oppose Mussolini and effectively mobilize the

monarchy to block an outcome that, for the time being, did not appear imminent—nor was it even part of Mussolini's intentions. This was all the more true because, on the one hand, it could not be ruled out at all that an intervention by the monarchy might have repercussions and consequences for the regime that this party either did not want or that some of its members would have been willing to risk facing only in the event of a "real" and "imminent" danger and, on the other hand, once the most critical moment had passed, the anti-German and anti-war party inevitably tended to split into groups and subgroups, to be less willing to recognize Ciano's leadership, and to propose different ways out of the crisis. Typical examples of this are, on the one hand, the formation—alongside, but essentially in competition with, the Ciano group—of a Balbo-De Bono-De Vecchi group (the three met in late January 1940 in Rhodes), which intended to act, bolstered by its members' status as the "quadrumviri" of the Fascist revolution, by exerting influence on the Grand Council (which, it seems, is precisely why Mussolini no longer convened it) 237, and from a

216 It is telling that during this period Mussolini took great care to inform Vittorio Emanuele III of the improvement in public sentiment and to present the causes to him in a light that was politically less damaging to him. As early as September 16, 1939, he telegraphed him: "Reports from the prefects, the State Police, the Carabinieri, the federal authorities, etc., indicate that the Italian people, having overcome the initial emotional turmoil of the first few days, are regaining their normal equilibrium. The instances of disarray—which were, in any case, only partial—were caused by the evacuation of the cities, their total blackout, the call-ups, and the hoarding of goods. All of this gave rise to a host of rumors which, like all rumors in exceptional times, arise, spread, and die out, and are believed only by that proportion of fools that exists in any national society. The resumption of ocean shipping, the end of the blackout, measures against hoarders, and other steps have restored the calm that had been disturbed only by the nervous crowds in the major cities" (Mussolini, XLIII, p. 19).

On the other hand, Balbo's plans to secure an appointment as ambassador to the U.S. in order to better influence Mussolini by establishing a bridge between Rome and Washington 238. Not to mention positions such as that of Bottai, who, although he initially gravitated toward Ciano's group and remained tied to him, if he hoped for anything, it was for Germany to shift its focus against the USSR, thereby altering the nature of the conflict 239; but who, in practice, ended up convincing himself fairly early on of the inevitability of Italian intervention and began to focus, as we shall see shortly, above all, the problems arising from its consequences for Italy and for Fascism.

Nor, finally, should we forget another aspect of the situation during those months that greatly contributed to putting the groups opposed to intervention in a difficult position. An aspect that is too simplistic to dismiss by resorting to hasty explanations such as the confusion of ideas, activism, and conformism that supposedly characterized fascism. These are true, and they certainly played a part, but on their own they explain very little and do not account for either the underlying reasons, its significance within Fascism proper, or the repercussions—initially negative but, from a certain point onward, positive for the regime—that it had in at least a portion of the broader Italian context of the time. While, with regard to the general public, the daily and midweek press, radio, and the LUCE newsreels followed the line we have reconstructed based on the instructions issued by Pavolini—a line, as we have seen, that was extremely careful to tailor the news, its sources, the order of importance to be assigned to them, and, above all, the way they were presented and commented on, depending on the moment and political expediency— even their graphic and photographic presentation—so as not to unduly alarm Italians, but at the same time to slowly instill in their minds a specific vision of the ongoing conflict and of Fascist Italy's position regarding it, going so far as to carefully manage nuances of tone and even the use of certain terms rather than others.[240] This differed from the more strictly party-affiliated press, namely

238 Balbo and his collaborators discussed the project with Sykes, the U.S. Navy's deputy attaché for aviation, who was visiting Libya on February 20, 1940. See ASAE, General Secretariat, p. 257, report from the U.S. naval attaché in Rome to the Navy Intelligence Service in Washington dated March 19, 1940.

239 G. Bottai, Diario, op. cit., ff. 792 ff., dated March 11, 1940: "Having reaffirmed its motto: 'Nothing new on the Western Front,' Germany should, once the Austrian, Czech, and Polish issues have been resolved in a European context, direct the belligerents toward the East."

240 Typical in this regard is the following passage from Pavolini's report to journalists on May 25, 1940 (ACS, Ministry of Popular Culture, Box 95, file "Journalists' Reports"): "As a matter of terminology, to refer to our allies we say 'Germans' or 'Germanic peoples.' Now it is advisable to use the term 'Germanic' above all for a reason that will certainly not escape your discernment. Using the term 'Germans' may provoke certain emotional reactions, especially in Northern Italy (particularly in certain areas of the Bergamo region)—reactions directed against the Germans that are almost always misdirected because they refer to the Austrians, etc. However, in these areas—especially in rural ones—the word "Germans" may evoke memories of those who were occupying the region at that time. When addressing Fascist cadres, young people, and intellectuals, the political discourse was framed in entirely different terms and with a very different tone. The purpose of these publications was not to allay the fears that characterized the mood of the masses (in this regard, the aim was at most to explain why, despite the differences between the two regimes and their perspectives, the Axis remained valid and necessary), but rather to prepare their readers to participate in the conflict, demonstrating its viability as well as its historical necessity and consistency with the principles of Fascism. And to do so using all the arguments relevant to the culture, psychology, and expectations of those fascists in whom—as was well known—there had also occurred, just as among the masses, "fluctuations" and "deviations" (which had often arisen from a prior state of dissatisfaction and frustration—or rather, weariness and disappointment—with the developments in Fascist politics)—which it was essential to combat and bring back into line, given that these very Fascists were to constitute the backbone of the regime and its strength—both static and dynamic—to overcome that difficult moment and then the ordeal of war.

The landscape of this press is not only vast but also highly varied, and it is not possible here to examine it in detail, as it would deserve. However, a few observations and explanatory citations are in order. First, it is worth noting the leading role played by Mussolini's personal magazine, *Gerarchia*, which was formally edited at the time by his nephew Vito Mussolini but was essentially run by editor-in-chief Carlo Ravasio, a veteran fascist in whom the "Duce" placed the utmost trust and whose work he generally followed closely, almost always reading the articles to be published in draft form and personally procuring or commissioning others. Staffed primarily by young people, *Gerarchia* is significant above all for its constant emphasis on the relationship between war and revolution. Here, the term "revolution" is to be understood as applying both to war between nations and to the meaning and significance that war would have within Italian society and for the "revolutionary" development of the Fascist regime. In the first sense, the italicized essay "War and Revolution," which appeared as early as the October 1939 issue M1, is particularly significant. It states, among other things:

Today's war has nothing to do with the war of '14: back then (with the exception of Italy), certain economic interests clashed in the struggle to conquer markets; today, ideas and peoples clash; the former, to preserve a hegemony that has shifted from the economic to the political sphere; the latter, to free themselves from a slavery that has shifted from the political to the economic sphere. The word

“Germanic,” on the other hand, has an entirely different connotation; it refers to our Germanic friends.”

economic bondage... The war is ideological, yes, but because ideologies serve other forces that represent the will to preserve and the need to conquer entire populations. Were these the interests of a few individuals, they could be reconciled; but at stake is the bread—and more than just bread—of hundreds of millions of people.

The clash, then, is no longer merely military, nor even, strictly speaking, ideological; it becomes revolutionary and takes on the characteristics of an immense social war among nations—not democracy versus Nazism, but conservation versus revolution; two classes of peoples, two centuries, two eras, two histories facing off...

“Europe,” said the Duce, “is not yet effectively at war, and the clash can still be avoided; but we must realize that it is a vain illusion to want to maintain—or worse still, to restore—positions that history and the natural dynamism of peoples have condemned.”

Will the nations that represent conservatism be wise enough to realize this? Will they understand that Germany is marking time only to wait for history—which, for the moment, has fallen behind and is merely observing?

Tomorrow, the forces of the waiting peoples could be unleashed; and the resulting war would be not only the greatest clash of armies but the most formidable social revolution of all ages.

And the same ideas, now expressed more clearly, without any “ifs,” are found in another italicized passage from seven months later, titled “Revolutionary War 242”:

Remember? In the distant days of strikes and social upheavals, the bosses used to say that the workers were always to blame for the disputes. Today, capitalist democracies repeat the same refrain.

But the Italian people must learn to distinguish the truth from the lies spread by propaganda. A major social conflict is underway among the nations. It began in 1935 with the war in Ethiopia; it led to the Rome-Berlin Axis; it continues in Northern Europe; it will spread wherever a pretext is offered to vent the pressure of the armies. But the struggle is not merely between demo-plutocratic hegemony and the growing aspiration for space on the part of totalitarian nations; the struggle transcends—and must transcend, in the name of the spirit—economic formulas themselves, even when applied to peoples: for it would serve no purpose, in fact, to replace one hegemony with another. The struggle aims at that justice among peoples which, through the equitable distribution of wealth and a healthy balance of responsibilities, constitutes a secure foundation for cooperation and civil progress.

For this reason, we Italians affirm that today’s war is totalitarian and revolutionary—a war of ideas, principles, constitutions, economies, and political, social, and monetary systems.

As for the second meaning—that pertaining to Italian society—it can be said that in recent months every issue of *Gerarchia* touched on this theme in some way, in its articles (especially the ever-numerous ones engaging in anti-bourgeois polemics) and in its editorials, through which the magazine waged its most significant battles. Sometimes in an almost direct manner, generally in an indirect one, their meaning was nonetheless clear. Fascism had to “return to its origins”; however, this return could in no way be what the “rich” and even some fascists desired—namely, to turn “the Revolution into a reaction” and even, “for the sake of Moscow,” to “lend a hand, perhaps, to the demoplutocracies.”

Early fascism had been “not only anti-Bolshevik, but also—and above all—anti-democratic, anti-liberal, and anti-reactionary.” It had been anti-Bolshevik “because the people were deceived by their false shepherds” and “it was urgent to save wealth—whoseever it belonged to—from the furious hands of those who, unable to possess it, wanted to destroy it,” but it had not been a force in the pay of any class to ensure its rule. “Today, fascism is with the people, and the people are with fascism. And there is only one way to be a fascist: to feel part of the people and share their hopes for justice, even if one is forced to get up from one’s armchair and make some material sacrifices” 243. Hence the moral, more or less clearly expressed but certainly implied to readers: the opponents of the revolution were the bourgeoisie, the wealthy (who “spark reactions,” while “the poor spark revolutions”) who, not coincidentally, also opposed the war and sided with the Anglo-French out of fear of Bolshevism, but also of “early fascism”... Nor were these arguments presented solely in *Gerarchia*; once the very initial period of disarray, confusion, and—in many cases—hope that Italy might not participate in the conflict had passed, they began to be developed in virtually all party publications, ranging from the youth-oriented, “avant-garde” and more or less linked to intransigentism, as well as in the more stately and pompous ones, generally averse to extremist stances (a typical example being *Civiltà fascista*, edited by Camillo Pellizzi and the official organ of the National Institute of Fascist Culture, to which Mussolini had assigned the central theme of “preparation for total war” 244), as well as on some of those which, given the personal stance of their editors, one might think should have avoided such positions but were unable to do so—not only, and not so much, because of what is generically termed conformism,

243 / regarding “Return to the Origins,” in *Gerarchia*, January 1940, pp. 15 ff.; from the same perspective, though more culturally elaborate, see also the previously cited article by G. Bottai, “Mussolini’s Concept of the ‘Permanent Revolution,’” op. cit., pp. 592 ff.

244 See, for example, fascist fascist, The war and us, in “Fascist ," May 1940, pp. 305 ff. The article is significant because reveals clearly how a a month since of Italy the the war it held to emphasize that, even though they would fight the war together, Fascism and National Socialism were different (even if “there is, however, just enough parallelism—and more than enough—to ensure that their endeavors must necessarily stand side by side in the face of those who are, without a doubt, common enemies”) and that, on the Italian side, mistrust of the Germans was such that they did not even rule out—though they deplored it—the possibility that after “the two peoples and the two revolutions” they might “destroy the solidarity that unites them and thus betray the great human and idealistic causes of their joint action.” But often, this was also due to a whole series of reasons stemming from the reality of the regime and the moment: partly to avoid cutting themselves off from the reality of fascism, partly to avoid giving their opponents an opportunity to attack and discredit them precisely as lukewarm fascists or even false fascists, partly because there was no uniformity of positions within their own editorial groups (so much so that many contributors also wrote for other fascist publications of different orientations), and partly—above all—because of the logic of what we have defined as the internal contradiction that undermined almost all groups opposed to the war and the alliance with Germany: having to operate within a framework that, if taken to its logical extreme, would lead to opposing Mussolini, while knowing full well that doing so—especially at that moment—would almost certainly jeopardize the regime’s survival and the prospects for a new course for fascism in the “post-Mussolini” era; hence, for them, the necessity, inability, or fear (political fear, sometimes compounded by personal fear) —depending on the case—to keep pace, to adapt to the progressive underlying orientation (while still trying to preserve their own autonomy of judgment and perspective on the ultimate goals) that was taking hold under pressure from the most pro-Mussolini groups and publications and, on another front (though in this regard the two pressures converged), from those that were more strictly pro-Nazi. Typical in this regard is the position of *Critica fascista*, which also contributed its share to the cause

of a war that, by putting an end to the “immoral status quo of vested interests,” would become a “revolutionary act” for the nations participating in it and for humanity, and which was therefore necessary to wage and direct toward the most just and humane outcomes for all peoples; and equally to the cause of war—social revolution at home. More significant for the purposes of our discussion are the articles in the first category. First and foremost are the editorials—and thus attributable to Bottai or one of his closest collaborators—in which the slow but steady shift is evident, from the early piece, *Facing Supreme Responsibilities*245 (which asserted that “Fascist Italy will leave no stone unturned to facilitate a just and peaceful solution,” but also urged London and Paris not to lead their peoples to believe that ‘totalitarian states might hesitate to support their sacrosanct claims by force of arms, if necessary’) and *La posizione dell’Italia*[246] (which still held out the possibility that Italy could, without taking action, ‘fully fulfill the role naturally assigned to us by Mussolini’s vision of international justice, and prevent a new Versailles’), to those that, a few months later, increasingly clearly portrayed intervention as inevitable and presented it as “proof of the truth of the Fascist corporatist conception”—to be made to triumph as the principle to be adopted by the peoples to achieve peace with justice 247—and as a true war of liberation, as “a movement of justice,” “the true crowning achievement of the Risorgimento” and “the final war for the freedom of the Italian people,” of the “new forces, which possess the lyrical energy of birth, especially when—as in the case of Fascism—they are the forces of a Revolution that proclaims to humanity a new watchword of order and justice”248. As for the articles signed by individual contributors who, in a certain sense, served as a bridge—as intermediate steps between the two extremes of the editorial pieces—almost as if to offer them a series of arguments to justify the shift from one position to another, a few examples will suffice to clarify their prevailing character. One is an article—which we have already cited for other reasons—by G. Granzotto 249 in which, as early as December 1, 1939, it was stated in no uncertain terms that it must be clear that, should current conditions persist, war is an inevitable, if not useful, incident; that there is little room to remain outside of it, even if one disapproves of the methods and systems of others; and that the only decisive idea capable of resolving the dilemma is to affirm and support different methods and systems to establish different conditions.

These statements undoubtedly sought to distance Italy from Germany and give Italian intervention its own political significance, distinct from that of Nazi war and peace, but they did not alter the substance of the shift in course from the magazine’s earlier positions. Nor did other positions—which centered on the corporatist nature of the new postwar national and international order or on a sort of fascist-corporatist Europeanism that was supposed to form the basis of the new international order—serve to alter this course, even though, upon closer reading, they had a polemical stance toward Germany—both because of the proposed socio-economic model and because the suggestion of a form of European integration revealed a desire to, to some extent, rein in German dynamism and hegemony after victory and, therefore, a lingering distrust of the ally alongside whom Italy was preparing to enter the war on the 25th.

It is very difficult to assess to what extent this campaign by the more explicitly fascist press achieved its intended results. As will be seen later, the Italian intervention took place in a very particular context, largely shaped by the unexpected and dramatic collapse of France and by the conviction that the conflict had already been decided and was nearing its end—a conviction that profoundly altered what had, until very recently, been the psychological attitude of large segments of the Italian population, particularly the Fascists. It would, however, be difficult to claim that no results were achieved at all. Various sources of intelligence—such as letters to the editor in party magazines and newspapers, wiretaps, and the monitoring of correspondence, not to mention a series of firsthand accounts—suggest that the activities of this press did yield some results, especially among young Fascists, even setting aside the collapse of France. These same sources—and even more so, a reading of the more strictly

fascist magazines we are examining—reveal, moreover, that on the whole, this impact was inversely proportional to the age and level of education of the individuals at whom the campaign was directed. One need only skim through the fascist magazines most actively engaged in this effort to realize this. Such an examination reveals that the campaign encountered the greatest resistance and failures among the more mature intellectuals and, above all, among the older generation. Among those who had been educated, in whole or in part, before fascism extended its control over education and succeeded—if not in monopolizing it (which it never did)—then certainly in largely bending it to its own ends; among those who had accepted Fascism and often even explicitly adhered to it as long as it seemed to them that they were, for better or worse, remaining within a certain pre-existing cultural tradition—toward which Fascism appeared to be essentially respectful or, at any rate, unwilling to sever ties and prevent them from continuing to live within it; but who now, faced with the most recent developments in Fascist domestic and foreign policy and the looming danger of war, felt they could no longer support a regime that was increasingly clearly driven by ethical and cultural values that no longer had any connection to that tradition, were in fact its negation, and threatened to plunge the country into an abyss of calamities both in the event of defeat (which most people anticipated at that time) and in the event of victory. This explains the recurring polemic in *Gerarchia* first and foremost, but also—albeit in different tones—in all party publications, against the “laggard” intellectuals (“pseudo-intellectuals are the philosophical frivolities of the bourgeoisie; they are those who, sitting in the shade of learned gardens while the Fatherland is at war, cannot fathom how man, homo sapiens, can suddenly rush to take up arms at a nod from the Leaders”251), the “bourgeois intellectuals,” pacifists, Anglophiles by “lifestyle” and, deep down, still tied to their self-serving liberal-democratic myths—and this explains why they served as a sounding board for the attacks launched against these intellectuals by the party and the local and youth press, which were concerned about the “depressing” influence their attitude had on the young people with whom they were in contact 252. It also explains the proliferation during this period of initiatives aimed at strengthening penetration and control over culture and intellectuals in order to prevent their drift away from the regime, to bring them more firmly under control, and to marginalize and silence voices that were too dissenting and dangerous. While we cannot dwell on all these initiatives, at least one of them must be mentioned: the launch in March 1940 of *Primato*, a fortnightly journal edited by Bottai and G. Vecchietti and explicitly aimed at the intellectual community.

The objective Bottai set for himself with *Primato*—in its essentially immediate political sense—was the same as that pursued by the other initiatives just mentioned. If one were to cut to the chase and limit oneself to this essence, one could say that the initiative of the Minister of National Education differed from the others only in its modus operandi—prudent, persuasive, aware of both the sentiments and the sensitive points and weaknesses of the intellectuals, careful to identify the real adversaries (first and foremost, Croce’s influence), so as not to multiply and scatter the attacks, and even to use against them ideas and motifs belonging to other cultural traditions—less dangerous or, in any case, easier to discredit—and to act against them not with a frontal attack from the outside, but with an enveloping tactic from within the cultural world itself. That is to say, as Mangoni25’ noted, by offering intellectuals the dual enticement of recognizing them as a caste and appealing to what Bottai, in the editorial of the first issue of *Primato*, defined as “the courage of harmony”: the end of mutual prejudices, mistrust, and misunderstandings that had led both intellectuals and fascism to withdraw into themselves, to view one another with suspicion, and to cease communicating; and the beginning of a new commitment, of a new “cultural interventionism,” to use the title of another editorial by Bottai (in the June 1, 1940, issue), aimed at making Fascist Italy “the sole, most valid guardian and custodian of civilization and culture” in Europe. Putting things in these terms, given the number and importance of the intellectuals who contributed to *Primato* from 1940 to 1943 and the subsequent cultural and political trajectories of many of them, one would be compelled—as has so often been done—to attempt an assessment of

the results achieved by Bottai through his initiative and, ultimately, to raise once again the issue of the "instability," "duplicity," and "opportunism" of a large part of Italian culture (including that which would later break decisively with fascism and help shape at least two postwar decades) in the face of fascism—a discourse that we do not deny is valid in some cases, but which, on the whole, remains superficial and, the more time passes, the more it reveals its inconsistency. At most—and from an entirely different perspective—one might observe that, with the positive aspect of his discourse on "the courage of harmony," Bottai demonstrated that, at heart, he too—like Mussolini—was moving along a path that led to a "new civilization" and that postulated a very specific "mission" and a sort of "primacy" for Fascist Italy. This is certainly not without significance for anyone who truly wishes to understand the nature and myth of fascism.

In reality, the "Primato" initiative was far more carefully considered; its origins were anything but contingent (the first announcement of the magazine's forthcoming publication appeared in "Critica fascista" on August 15, 1939), it looked much further ahead, and it cannot even be ruled out that Bottai, in addition to considering it a response to a vital need—one that was anything but contingent or instrumental for fascism—might have intended to derive personal political benefits from it as well; that is, as has already been noted, to use it to position himself as Mussolini's successor—the fascist leader capable of charting the cultural course of a new fascism able to contend with the new domestic and international realities. One thing is certain: even though it presented itself as a literary and arts magazine, *Primato* was a political magazine—exquisitely and intelligently political.

In addition to what we have said so far, to accurately situate "Primato" in its context, it is worth bearing in mind a lengthy letter-report that Bottai wrote to Mussolini on July 20, 1940, which we have already cited in the previous volume of this work (p. 254) in the text partially published by Bottai himself in *Ventanni e un giorno*, but which the reader will now find in the Appendix, Document 13, in its unabridged and previously unpublished form. It clearly shows that the crisis in the relationship between intellectuals and Fascism (the "hostile silence of culture") dated, according to Bottai, well before August–September >39, when "virtually all of Italy found itself Anglophile and Francophile, anti-German, and anti-revolutionary," and that he had long been grappling with the issue of both its causes and how to address it, as well as how to revive a process of collaboration between the cultural world and Fascism. Thus, for Bottai, the crisis of August–September was merely a further reason to launch his initiative. Nor does the significance of the letter-report to Mussolini end there. Reading it alongside the issues of *Primato* published around the time of Italy's entry into the war is, in fact, crucial for establishing at least two things. First, that what truly lay close to Bottai's heart was the realization of "revolutionary fascism" and that, therefore, his opposition to the war alongside Germany must have essentially vanished as soon as the Minister of National Education realized (and this must have happened before *Primato* began publication) that insisting on it meant, in one way or another, opposing Mussolini and giving up on carrying out the "fascist revolution"; and this despite the fact that Bottai was fully aware that a German victory would plunge Italy into great difficulties. In a letter to Mussolini, he was explicit on this point, and there is no reason to believe that his remarks stemmed solely from the fact that Italy had entered the war a month earlier and that he considered victory practically assured and the conflict about to end. These new circumstances could only have made it more urgent for him to act. His aim was to prevent the emergence, after victory, of "two separate spheres of influence," "two relatively autarkic economic units," and "two autonomous entities," which would have strengthened German racism and imperialism for at least three reasons: a) because a Germany confined to its borders would inevitably seek to subordinate the interests of neighboring countries to its own, would inevitably seek, sooner or later, to reach the Mediterranean via Trieste, would inevitably strive for ever-greater influence in that sea, and, in other words, would inevitably extend its dominance to the detriment of others' spheres of influence;

b) because, given the different starting points of the two economies, “competition will be entirely to our detriment, and a relationship of dependence cannot be avoided”; c) because under these conditions, Germany would have sought to make the other economies—including Italy’s—complementary to its own. Second, that the most politically significant themes developed by *Primato* after June 10, 1940—though already present in the issues from the months of “non-belligerence”—and in particular that of Fascist Europeanism, which “Primato” was always the most distinctive and the one underpinning all the others (and which, not coincidentally, was also present, as we have seen, in “Critica fascista”), were chosen with very specific intentions and aimed to establish, on a cultural level, a postwar strategy designed to address those consequences that, according to Bottai’s conviction, would result from a German victory. In this context, it is not only evident that for Bottai the recruitment of intellectuals went far beyond the specific, contingent moment in which *Primato* was founded, but also that the participation of so many intellectuals in *Primato*—and, broadening the scope of the discussion itself, in the development in subsequent years of the theme of the “new order”—takes on a new perspective: one must ask (and it would be useful to explore this further through ad hoc research) to what extent the success of “Primato” might be attributed—at least as long as a victory for the Tripartite Alliance remained a realistic possibility—to Bottai’s ability to offer these intellectuals a vision of engagement — namely, the realization of a fascist Europeanism capable of serving as the unifying element of a new Europe, in which the divisions between victors and vanquished would be overcome in the name of a shared culture, and founded on the premise of a corporatist structure for the continent that would avert the danger of the formation of two or more autonomous economic units, as denounced by Bottai in his letter-report to Mussolini — which they perceived at the same time as a manifestation of Italian civil “primacy,” as the assertion and defense of a cultural and moral tradition, and, ultimately, by some as a counterpoint to Nazism, and by others as the actual development of the “Fascist revolution.” In this regard, the following passage from the letter-report to Mussolini is significant: in it, Bottai—speaking of the relationship of dependence in which, given the differing economic structures of Germany and Italy, the latter would find itself in the event of a structure based on separate spheres of influence—warned:

Given the different starting points, competition will be entirely to our detriment, and the relationship of dependence cannot be avoided. In other words, the ideal of autarky will find its own negation within itself, and what we seek to avoid will, paradoxically, be brought about. From a social standpoint, moreover, mutual autarkies cannot help but give rise to the establishment of two plutocracies—and particularly an Italian plutocracy serving the stronger one. The revolutionary goal, thwarted on the international stage, will be denied all the more in domestic politics.

Having discussed the domestic situation, let us now return to the international political landscape, and in particular to relations with Germany on the one hand and with England and France on the other. For the sake of clarity, but also due to the objective validity of the periodization itself, the nine months of “non-belligerence” can be divided into two distinct periods, with the starting point—the German offensive in the West in April—serving as the dividing line.

The first of these two periods—during which Mussolini never actually gave serious thought to the issue of intervention, believed he could maintain “non-belligerence” for as long as he wished, and hoped that a compromise peace would render Italy’s intervention unnecessary, thereby allowing him to achieve his minimum program of Mediterranean claims—was characterized by a nearly effective neutrality and by relations that —appearances (and not even very convincing ones) aside—were better (at least through

the end of February) with the Anglo-French than with the Germans, and which more or less immediately influenced relations with the other countries as well. Typical in this regard are, on the one hand, relations with the USSR, which went through a period of coldness and controversy during these months and, as mentioned, reached, on the occasion of the Finnish-Soviet conflict, to the brink of an outright rupture (suspension of Soviet oil supplies, recall of the respective ambassadors) and saw Ciano make promises of assistance to Hungary and Romania in the event of a Soviet attack and encourage anti-Soviet factions in Japan 255; and, on the other hand, relations with the Holy See, which, by contrast, showed a marked improvement, formally sealed by the solemn visit on December 21 by the king and queen to the pope and, even more so, by the visit a week later by Pius XII (rather than, as was customary, the Secretary of State) to the Quirinal Palace 256.

Relations with Germany, which on August 25–26 had been on the verge of breaking down 257, marked a formal recovery. But this was not due to Italy, as Ciano never missed an opportunity to stir up sources of friction

256 On both occasions, Pius XII made a point of emphasizing his satisfaction with Italy's policy of peace (see ADSS, I, pp. 345 ff. and 362 ff.). The conferral of the Order of the Golden Spur on Ciano should be viewed in the same light. Mussolini, who had accepted the rapprochement solely for reasons of domestic and foreign policy, did not attend the two ceremonies and made no secret of his disappointment to his son-in-law: "I am increasingly a Ghibelline. The coat of arms of Forlì features the white-sided eagle." Cf. G. Ciano, Diario, op. cit., p. 375.

The improvement in relations with the Holy See was judged by the British Embassy in Rome as "an attempt by the Monarchy, supported in this by the Fascist government (probably at the instigation of Count Ciano), to tighten the ranks of Italians between the Monarchy and the Papacy, to align the Kingdom and the Empire with Christendom, and to send a clear warning to Moscow and a 'note to the reader' to Berlin." This assessment appears in a report sent to the Foreign Office on January 2, 1940, and intercepted by Italian intelligence services, ASAE, General Secretariat, p. 239.

and to prevent them from gaining ground 258, he strove to give "non-belligerence" the character of true neutrality—and often active neutrality—in a manner unfavorable to the Germans, thus hoping to discourage further German military initiatives after the conclusion of the Polish campaign and to be able—as Attolico 259 also believed, the Italian diplomat who perhaps had the greatest influence on him during this period — to propose, with greater success, a compromise solution to the conflict, thereby avoiding, from this perspective, becoming involved in the so-called German "peace offensive" of October '39, convinced that, as it had been conceived by Hitler (and behind the scenes by Stalin), it could not lead to concrete results, and that supporting it would therefore jeopardize Italy's position. Thus, the credit for the improvement in relations went primarily to the Germans, who—having decided to make the best of a bad situation and mend the alliance—worked to defuse tensions with Rome. Aware that, apart from Mussolini (and even regarding him, Hitler was practically the only one who felt quite confident) and a few others, the entire establishment of the regime was opposed to them, they decided to let Mussolini regain effective control of the internal Italian situation and, above all, to play for time, confident that time was working in their favor, content for the moment with the benefits (the deployment of a certain number of French and British forces along the Italian borders and the possibility of receiving valuable supplies via Italy and conducting profitable trade with it, while at the same time saving on the aid they would otherwise have had to provide) that, despite everything, "non-belligerence" assured them. And above all, to limit the domestic and international political and psychological damage caused by Italy's defection. It is in this latter context—and, in particular, in light of the German desire to portray the Axis as alive and functioning and to deny the existence of

disagreements between Rome and Berlin—that the talks (initiated by the Germans, who would have preferred a meeting between Hitler and Mussolini, an idea that was, however, dropped by Rome2M) that Ciano held on October 1 and 2 in Berlin with von Ribbentrop and Hitler. In practical terms, these talks meant very little"1. The German side was particularly keen to set the tone

261 See the account in *L'Europa verso la catastrofe*, op. cit., pp. 466 ff.

There is no record of any specific instructions from Mussolini to Ciano regarding the talks. If there were any—and it is likely there were—we believe they would not have differed substantially from those the "Duce" had written on September 10 to Attolico (DDI, s. IX, I, pp. 84 ff.). These letters emphasized several points in particular: a) the direct and indirect benefits the Germans derived from Italian neutrality; b) his intention to "remain in this position for an indefinite period"; c) the absurdity of any display of great cordiality and "understanding" toward the Italian position and to use it to demonstrate their willingness to keep Rome informed of their plans for the future, to present the agreements with the Soviets (those of August and those of three days earlier) in the best and most reassuring light 262, to reaffirm their willingness to respect commitments regarding present and future Italian spheres of influence, and to extol the power of their war machine. As Andre 263 astutely noted, however, Hitler inserted into this conciliatory and charming context a few phrases that not only reveal his resentment toward Italy 264 but are difficult not to regard as not-too-veiled threats—and which must have had no small influence on Mussolini's future decisions. According to Ciano's account 265, Hitler—drawing on Italy's plans to create a bloc of neutral states and after feigning approval of them—said:

But the Duce must bear in mind that if Germany goes to war, the struggle will decide not only the fate of Germany but also that of Italy. The fate of fascism is closely linked to the fortunes of National Socialism. Now I tell you—as I told you in Salzburg when speaking about Poland—that with regard to the Western democracies, having already factored in all the aid they may receive from third powers, I have the mathematical certainty of victory... In any case, convey to the Duce my conviction that Italy's absence from the struggle and Germany's defeat would spell the end of Italy's great imperial aspirations in the Mediterranean.

As can be seen, while Hitler's speech may, on the one hand, have been intended merely to emphasize that if Germany were defeated, Mussolini's imperial plans—and the regime itself—would no longer have any future, on the other hand—and given Hitler's certainty of victory—it could also have meant that the same fate would befall the "Duce's" plans in the event of a German victory achieved without Italy's active contribution.

Just how relations between Rome and Berlin were in reality far from Italian action against France ("that would mean being more Catholic than the Pope") "when all official and unofficial German statements tend to rule France out of the picture"; d) the need for the German people to be informed of Hitler's full consent to "non-belligerence," because, "if the German sentiment—based on a false understanding of events—were known in Italy, public opinion would react in an unstoppable manner."

For Mussolini's reactions to the progress of the Berlin talks—and in particular his failure to share Hitler's confidence in victory and his even hoping for a "setback" for Hitler—see G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 356.

262 According to Ciano (L'Europa verso la catastrofe, op. cit., p. 476), von Ribbentrop went "so far as to say that he feels just as at home among the members of the Politburo and the Comintern as he

does among the old guard of Nazism or the old squadristi."

264 A typical manifestation of German resentment during this period was the recurring German accusation that Italy had provoked British and French intervention in the war by informing London and Paris of its decision not to enter the war on Germany's side. See DDI, vol. IX, I, p. 474; II, pp. 74, 104 ff., 438 ff.; III, p. 94.

Just how clear this was—and how determined the Germans were, if necessary, to use force to bring Italy back into the fold—is, moreover, clearly demonstrated by their attitude toward the plan, championed by Rome between September and November to strengthen its international position and the autonomy of its neutrality, for a bloc of neutral nations to which the Danube-Balkan countries, Spain, and possibly even Japan. At first—thinking of a possible collective action by the neutral powers against the Anglo-French naval blockade—the Germans did not seem to view it unfavorably; however, as soon as its true nature became evident—far from being merely economic, as Rome had tried to lead them to believe—the interest it generated was not limited to just a few of the countries in question, and first and foremost in Romania (whose position was of particular concern to Germany due to the importance of Romanian oil supplies and the fears aroused in Bucharest by the new relations between the Germans and the Soviets and by the latter's designs on Bessarabia), but also among the Anglo-French, and the openly anti-Soviet and anti-German character it was assuming, their stance became increasingly critical, until it culminated in outright opposition, in the face of which Rome, in turn, had no choice but to align itself with its ally's viewpoint, even though Ciano did in fact continue for some time to encourage the Romanians to press ahead with their plan, assuring them that Italy's stance "remained as it had been until now," even if it did not intend to take any initiatives or participate in a possible blockade2W. Other sources of constant friction included the slow pace and difficulties encountered in the negotiations to implement a resolution of the South Tyrol issue, the increasingly pronounced anti-Soviet stance of the Italian press and government (during the Finnish-Soviet conflict, Germany prohibited the transit through its territory of Italian military supplies and aid to Finland), Italy's passive resistance to serving as a large-scale conduit for German imports—which had been cut off by the Anglo-French naval blockade—and to diverting further substantial portions of its own exports to Germany (partly for political reasons, partly to avoid losing lucrative markets that paid in hard currency), from the supplies of war material—or materials otherwise useful to the war effort—that Italy provided to England and, above all, to France; from Rome's refusal to take the lead in a decisive joint action by neutral nations against the blockade; and, finally, connected to all of this, by what would prove to be the true crux of Italian-German relations and the real weapon in Germany's possession—one that, until the fall of France altered the terms of the issue, grew in importance in Germany's hands as time passed, thereby limiting Mussolini's freedom of maneuver: coal supplies 267.

To meet domestic needs and boost steel exports, Italy required—in addition to building up stockpiles—approximately 15 million metric tons of various types of coal annually. About 2 million metric tons were produced in Italy. The remainder had, until then, been imported mainly from Germany, England, and Poland. According to the agreements signed in February, Germany had committed to supplying 10.7 million metric tons of coal during 1939, equivalent to approximately 900,000 metric tons per month. In fact, supplies remained at around 700,000 metric tons in September and the first half of October, while those from Poland dried up. In the second half of October, shipments from the Upper Silesian mines were suspended and others were reduced (from the planned 22,000 metric tons per day to 5,000), with the Germans citing a lack of rail cars for transport as justification. Consequently, almost all shipments had to be made by sea from Rotterdam, since the British blockade prevented ships from departing German ports. On November 28, however, these shipments also ran into trouble, as the Allies had extended the blockade to German goods loaded at neutral ports. In this situation, Italian efforts

focused on two goals: securing an increase in German supplies by land and developing shipments from England. The British stated they were prepared to supply 4 million metric tons annually in addition to the 4 million they were already providing. To purchase these, including the cost of goods, freight, and insurance, approximately 1 million pounds were required—a very large sum given Italy's difficult economic situation—unless Italy supplied England with the armaments it demanded, which Rome was very reluctant to sell, especially to avoid further antagonizing Berlin, which was already protesting the substantial military supplies Italy was providing to France under old contracts signed before the outbreak of the war, as well as new ones that Italy was trying to keep as secret as possible (of 946 million lire in contracts for military supplies abroad, 409 in 1939 were with France). The Germans, after initially stalling, suddenly declared in mid-December that they were willing to supply one million metric tons of coal per month by land in addition to any possible shipments by sea, provided that Italy made available one-third of the 30,000–32,000 railcars needed. The offer was immediately regarded as "a veritable bluff," both because it seemed impossible for the Germans to fulfill it and because the German railways' turnaround times for the railcars exceeded those stipulated in the proposed agreement. It was therefore clear that this was a ploy to blackmail Italy, forcing it to reject the British proposals and placing its economy at Germany's mercy. The proposal, however, placed Rome in serious difficulty, as it could not and would not let it fall through—partly to avoid straining political relations with Berlin, partly to avoid jeopardizing the possibility of receiving the approximately half a million metric tons per month that the Germans had supplied up to that point, and finally, because—even if not favorable overall—trade with Germany entailed a smaller outlay of foreign currency than purchasing larger quantities of coal from the British would have required, assuming the British had been willing to supply it without receiving the requested military supplies in return; otherwise, a crisis with Berlin would have been inevitable. For the time being, the issue was resolved by accepting the German proposal and attempting to use it to induce London to show "greater understanding" toward Italian needs.[2]M. But this did not resolve the coal supply issue; on the contrary, it became one of the strongest weapons in German hands, given that London was unwilling to help Mussolini continue to navigate the contradictions and difficulties of his policy.

Given what we have said in the preceding pages, there is little to add to illustrate the British position toward Italian "non-belligerence." Unlike the French, who were influenced by a wide range of sentiments—so that in France there was a whole spectrum of attitudes ranging from those who wanted an agreement with Rome and accused England of blocking it to those who would have preferred that Italy, too, enter the war so as to deliver a decisive blow to the "soft underbelly" of the Axis— the British had welcomed "non-belligerence" with genuine relief; they were convinced of the wisdom of encouraging its continuation for as long as Mussolini needed to make his final decision, but they were also convinced that this should under no circumstances involve concessions that would only strengthen the "Duce's" desire to exploit his position and prolong his maneuvering between the two sides. Chamberlain was particularly convinced of this; he was also certain that, in the end, Mussolini would be forced to side with the Anglo-French. The minutes of the Supreme Allied Council, recently published in France, offer yet another confirmation of this. At the Council's first meeting, on September 12, 1939, speaking about relations with Italy, the prime minister was explicit; to Daladier, who argued for the need to "pousser l'Italie à rester neutre," he replied that it was essential above all not to create unnecessary incidents and to give Italy everything it needed, "but nothing more," so as to prevent it from becoming too strong and supplying Germany; as for the rest, there was nothing to be done: "it seems pointless to make offers [to Mussolini] at this moment to push him down a path he is bound to take anyway" 26\ Chamberlain held to this view until April 1940, when, faced with the "provocative and insolent" attitude adopted by Italy following the shift in military operations brought about by German actions in Denmark and Norway, the Allies for the first time seriously considered the possibility of an Italian intervention—first against Yugoslavia or Greece, and then even against them—

though this did not yet lead, for about another month, to the definitive fading of hopes for a “change of heart” on Mussolini’s part and, what is even more significant, without a decision being made to respond with force to a possible Italian attack on Yugoslavia or Greece. The minutes of the Supreme Allied Council are explicit on this point as well. At the April 23 meeting, during which the issue was discussed, Chamberlain put it this way:

Evidently, war could be declared on Italy immediately. The British Cabinet has considered this possibility and has concluded that, given the various and heavy burdens the Allies are already facing, it would not be desirable to come to that. The question, therefore, is to examine what measures can be taken short of acts of war against Italy.

And the Council endorsed his view, limiting itself to deciding on a demonstrative naval buildup in the Mediterranean.[271] Obviously, not all British politicians were as optimistic as the prime minister; Churchill and, even more so, Eden, for example, were more inclined to view Mussolini as Hitler’s “jackal” and to believe it likely that he would eventually enter the war on the Germans’ side; nevertheless, everyone was increasingly certain that, whatever decision he might make, the “Duce” would act solely on the basis of a purely self-serving calculation: he would go where he believed he could gain the greatest advantage.

Bolstered by this conviction—and given that it was in any case extremely important to delay as long as possible any Italian intervention on Germany’s side, since, as Halifax immediately wrote to Bonnet, “our communications across the Mediterranean are vital to us and to France and must under no circumstances be endangered”— 272, the Foreign Office’s and the British government’s course of action throughout the entire period of “non-belligerence” was guided by a few clear principles: no provocation toward Italy (it is in this light that one must view the extreme caution with which London handled all Balkan issues and, in particular, the shelving of plans for action in Thessaloniki), excellent formal relations, no concessions either on the British side or, if possible, on the French side; and a wait-and-see approach, determined to show the utmost firmness in rejecting the overtures and recurring proposals for mediation or even an agreement that, directly or indirectly, through normal diplomatic channels and via a whole series of more or less unofficial emissaries, Ciano, from the very first days following the Anglo-French entry into the war, began sending to London 273. If Mussolini were to join, so much the better, but since he might just as well side with the Germans, and the indefinite continuation of “non-belligerence” did not mean that at some point he might not change his mind, it was necessary to prepare militarily for that eventuality and not to strengthen Italy’s war potential in any way.

Within the framework of this course of action, the economic aspect was of great importance to London, both with regard to any supplies Italy might provide to England and, above all, because Italy’s economic needs and difficulties could offer opportunities to keep Mussolini away from Germany. Hence the importance the British attached to trade relations with Italy and their use of the maritime blockade not only to combat Germany but also to influence Italy’s stance, to condition and keep under control—and if necessary weaken—its economic potential, and to prevent it from becoming, alongside the USSR and, given its geographical position, even more so than the USSR, the conduit for a series of supplies that Germany needed. Significant in this regard are the concerns raised in mid-April in London and Paris by Allied experts’ estimates regarding Italian oil purchases (565,000 metric tons per month

compared to a requirement of 224,000). This explains the “goodwill” that, as Italian protests grew more insistent, London seemed willing to demonstrate in enforcing the blockade on German goods destined for Italy, as well as its “willingness” to increase coal supplies when German shipments became difficult; but it also explains the limited progress that, in reality (and despite Italian efforts), Italian-British trade relations actually made during these months: until the decisive factors in Mussolini’s decisions shifted—with the fall of France—to other considerations, these relations were, for London—even more so than for Berlin—the most important arrow in its quiver for influencing the Italian stance.

The French position was different. Both within the government and military circles, and above all among the French political class, the outbreak of war had intensified disagreements over the stance to take toward Italy. “Non-belligerence,” however, was of such importance to France[274] that Mussolini’s adoption of it had led many to hope that, as in 1914–1915, Italy’s position would undergo a gradual shift toward an increasingly less favorable stance toward Germany and had strengthened the tendency toward an agreement with Mussolini that would make his neutrality definitive or even push him to side with the Anglo-French. And even those who did not trust the “Duce” and were unwilling to make sacrifices to reach an agreement with him until his position had become clearer were eager to keep the political dialogue with Rome open, careful to speak more of the struggle against Germanism than against totalitarianism, and willing—to facilitate this—to accommodate Italian demands, often to a much greater extent than the British were. Not to mention those who, having opposed the war—perceiving it as a sort of British overreach against France and seeking its swift conclusion—envisioned a peace “made in Rome” and viewed Mussolini as the “maitre de l’heure” 275 who, more than anyone else, could bring it about. Consequently, although Paris formally shared London’s line of conduct, a clear divergence in attitudes emerged from the very first days of the conflict between the two governments and their respective ambassadors in Rome; this divergence characterized the entire period of “non-belligerence” and was scarcely affected by the changes in the French government and at the helm of the Quai d’Orsay that occurred during those months.

The area where this divergence was most evident was that of economic relations, which Paris proposed to Rome to intensify as early as the beginning of September (a communiqué from the French Council of Ministers announced that purchases totaling five billion francs would be made in Italy). These relations saw a significant increase across all sectors, including the war effort, and continued right up until the Italian invasion—so much so that on June 10, several trains carrying strategic materiel were held up in Ventimiglia, on the verge of crossing into France. Not infrequently, the French—showing considerable willingness to accommodate Italy’s need to conceal the nature and details of the agreements from the Germans— resorted to a wide variety of expedients (starting with convening the joint commission in charge of trade negotiations in San Remo, far from prying eyes and ears) and made exceptions for Italy regarding the naval blockade—exceptions that the British were careful not to make. Even at a more strictly political level, the French position was (despite the disagreements this caused within the government) much more conciliatory than the British one. And this was true not only with regard to individual minor issues (such as, for example, the plan to establish a Garibaldi Legion advocated by certain sectors of the anti-fascist émigré community, which the Daladier government rejected so as not to provoke Mussolini’s wrath) that were of concern to Rome, but also with regard to fundamental issues.

The instructions that Daladier and Bonnet gave to François-Poncet in the days immediately following the outbreak of hostilities were explicit 777:

The French government’s desire is to do everything in its power to help Italy continue the stance it has adopted. You will strive to ensure that this stance—which is clearly provisional in nature—is

transformed into a more clearly defined and stable neutrality. This neutrality, even if it does not involve hostility toward Germany, will constitute a valuable moral victory.

Unlike Loraine, whom the Foreign Office had instructed to avoid and drop any political discussion with the Italians, François-Poncet was authorized to engage in any kind of conversation with Ciano to achieve this objective—and, if the Italians were willing, even to discuss the resolution of outstanding issues between the two countries that were the subject of the Baudouin mission. Nor were these instructions intended merely as guidelines for the ambassador's conduct. Paris's willingness to initiate negotiations whenever it deemed appropriate was in fact communicated by François-Poncet to Ciano on September 16, and Daladier confirmed this to Guariglia thirteen days later, as if to urge Rome to respond to the overture made by the ambassador 778.

A report by the PAI intelligence services dated October 7, 1939, based on information gathered from François-Poncet's inner circle, stated that he believed he could work to "satisfy" Italy with non-territorial concessions, namely: a new statute for Italians in Tunisia in which their rights would be equated with those of "French" Tunisians, "concessions" for Djibouti

In response to these official overtures—and despite the fact that various French politicians (and Laval in particular) repeatedly offered to act as intermediaries to discreetly initiate negotiations (in January, Baudouin traveled to Rome and tried in vain to meet with Ciano)—the Italian side never provided any response, not even a simple acknowledgment that might suggest a willingness to address the "unresolved issues" between the two countries or an interest in learning what concessions Paris was willing to make. François-Poncet, who had established good relations with Ciano—including on a personal level—and saw him often (much more frequently than Loraine), attempted several times to steer the conversation toward this issue, but to no avail: Ciano invariably ignored the hints and invitations and dropped the subject. As the French diplomat wrote in his book on his mission to Rome 279, I had not failed to raise the issue of settling Franco-Italian disputes and to steer our meetings toward the subject of Italian claims. What exactly was Italy demanding? What did it expect from France?... Ciano did not answer me; he did not follow my line of reasoning. The subject did not seem to interest him. He behaved as if it were not worth engaging in such a discussion, certain that it would lead nowhere. It was not until the weeks immediately preceding Italy's entry into the war that he yielded to my pressing questions. And it was only to tell me that it was too late and that no concession or cession we might have agreed to—even if it had exceeded those mentioned by Paul Baudouin—could now halt the course of events.

Nor is this surprising.

As far as Mussolini was concerned, it is easy to understand that the unexpected outbreak of the conflict had pushed the claims against France into the background. The issues at hand and the stakes were now much greater. In the new situation, a resumption and a possible successful conclusion of the negotiations initiated with Baudouin would have had only negative consequences for Mussolini. They would have tied his hands with regard to both a negotiated solution to the conflict and his participation in it, and would have drawn Germany's wrath upon him. Moreover, there would be no guarantees for the future, especially if—with the fall of his potential role as arbitrator having eliminated the possibility of a compromise peace—the conflict were to end with the victory of one side over the other. In such a case, it was clear that Italy would be exposed to the vengeance which was by no means unlikely, from the victor—whether it were Germany, which had been betrayed, or the Anglo-French, who had been forced to submit to Mussolini's blackmail. And, on the other hand, for what? To obtain Suez, a substantial loan, and the resumption of trade between the two countries, ACS, Ministry of Italian

Africa, Director General of Political Affairs (1900–1943), b. 1.

from Paris—assuming he actually received it and that it wasn't all a ploy to discredit him permanently in Hitler's eyes—less than what he hoped to gain either in the event of a compromise peace brokered by him or in the event of participating in the conflict on Germany's side? But these arguments did not apply only to Mussolini; in fact, not even Ciano—even though his goal was to avoid intervening alongside Germany—could completely escape their logic. This was all the more true because, while Ciano relied primarily on relations with Berlin to achieve his goal, convinced that only their course could truly influence his father-in-law's attitude, as far as relations with Paris and London were concerned, he always continued—despite Britain's obvious reluctance in the face of his overtures—to regard those with London as more important, without realizing that while the British undoubtedly held the leadership of the alliance, the weak link in the alliance, as far as Italy was concerned, was France; and that therefore, if he wanted to try to offer Mussolini some concrete advantage that would facilitate his break with Berlin, he could achieve this only by going through Paris—and not by courting London too assiduously, which would be counterproductive given his conviction that, in the end, Italy would not side with Germany anyway. Hence his underestimation of the French card and his failure to even attempt to sound out Paris's actual intentions—convinced that it would serve no purpose, would only entail risks, and would meet with Mussolini's opposition—and his decision to stake everything, on the one hand, on establishing good relations with England and on all those initiatives—such as the blockade of neutral nations—that could strengthen Italy's neutrality and the "Duce's" capacity for mediation; and, on the other hand, on not improving relations with Germany, so that he could use both arguments to dissuade his father-in-law from hastening the timing of his entry into the war; all while awaiting a compromise peace or—as Ciano considered more likely—an Anglo-French victory that, by setting a clear course for the conflict, would cause him to change his mind. From this perspective, it is understandable how Ciano, pressed by François-Poncet's urging to discuss Italian claims, would sometimes let himself make statements that, rather than expressions of cynicism, were in fact outbursts of sincerity, going so far as to tell him that what would ultimately determine Italy's stance would be Allied victories; in the absence of such victories, Italy would side with Germany 280. And, more generally, it also becomes clear why Ciano himself, speaking with Anfuso about "non-belligerence" 281, said that it was "everything and nothing": nothing as long as it remained as such, everything if it were to turn into something else.

Deliberately ignored by the French and blocked on the British front by London's firm stance, Ciano's policy seemed, in the early months of "non-belligerence," to make some headway on the German front. Despite German goodwill and pressure, relations between Rome and Berlin showed no real improvement, and Italy managed to compromise neither its neutrality nor its potential freedom of action, thereby avoiding an increase in Anglo-French suspicions. All of this took place with Mussolini's full consent. This is demonstrated by the proceedings of the Grand Council meeting on the evening of December 7, during which Ciano delivered an extremely comprehensive report from the very beginning on Italian-German relations, citing and reading—with Mussolini's authorization—the most important documents exchanged between Rome and Berlin in August, and giving his analysis a tone of open criticism of the Germans, which, while not amounting to a repudiation of the alliance, clearly tended to cast its future in a highly problematic light. Bottai, who in his diary has preserved for us a detailed account of both the meeting and Ciano's report,[2] summarized its essence as follows:

The gist of Galeazzo's report. A historical—and in part ideological—current, stretching from Ethiopia to Spain, brought the two regimes closer together and thus bound them in alliance; a historical current opposed to the first is driving Germany to violate both the letter and the spirit of the pact with Italy, hastening deadlines and shifting the direction of its actions from anti-Bolshevism to collusion with

Bolshevism; a historical trend, therefore, arises from the contrast between the first two, placing Italy in a position of non-belligerence. It is from the facts, then—that is to say, from imminent history—that Italy will draw the basis for its future course of action. The pact with Germany remains a fact; another fact is Germany's deviation from the agreed-upon directives: Italy will act accordingly, depending on the consequences. In short, a position of measured realism.

Mussolini, who had outlined the agenda to be approved, had shown himself reluctant to follow his son-in-law to the ultimate consequences implied in the report, but he had not contested them, limiting himself to making it clear that the solution he hoped for was one of peace without true victors or vanquished. Bottai noted:

G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 372, provides no further details, except that Mussolini was reportedly "very satisfied" with his report. There is also an account of the meeting in G. Acerbo, *Fra due plotoni di esecuzione*, op. cit., pp. 421 ff., which is interesting for its details on the clearly anti-German stance of the vast majority of the Grand Council's members (Balbo is even said to have floated the idea of Italy switching sides to the Anglo-French camp), but which raises serious doubts regarding what it states about Mussolini's position—according to Acerbo, Mussolini reportedly said that Italy should no longer feel bound by the "Pact of Steel," since Germany had violated both the "Anti-Comintern Pact" (through its agreement with the USSR) and the "Pact of Steel" itself (by invading Poland without notifying Italy), and, in a dispute with Farinacci, he allegedly denied that Hitler could accuse Italy of treason.

A tormented speech, seething with controversy and critical spirit: a reluctance to admit that the facts had disproved the pacts; and, therefore, a deep-seated desire that circumstances might still allow Italy to remain faithful to them... Italy? It declares its loyalty to the pacts: "But is there, after all, also a pact with England?"; and it awaits events. "Here, there are two empires at war; two lions. We have no interest in either one winning decisively. If England were to win, it would leave us nothing but the sea for swimming. If Germany were to win, we would feel the weight of it. One might hope that the two lions tear each other apart until only their tails remain on the ground. And, if need be, go and pick them up."

Overall: Mussolini is once again aligned with Galeazzo's cold assessment, even though Galeazzo is already on the other side and opposed to the Axis. Mussolini hopes this will hold; Galeazzo hopes the opposite. When the former, speaking of the military preparations needed to enter a possible conflict, cites the huge numbers of cannons, airplanes, and tanks he wants to have by the second half of 1941, Galeazzo, who is sitting next to me, whispers in my ear: "Which means we'll never be ready."

Both in Italy and abroad, the fact that the agenda approved by the Grand Council (Resolution 283) did not explicitly mention neutrality and confirmed the validity of the alliance with Germany had been a disappointment, which had overshadowed the measured reference to the negative consequences that the Anglo-French naval blockade had for Italy and the clearly anti-Soviet (and therefore anti-German) nature of the passage emphasizing Italy's direct interest in any changes in the Danube-Balkan region. For Ciano, however, the meeting had been a major success, not only because his policy had been officially endorsed by Mussolini in a photograph, but also because the Grand Council had given him a mandate to report "on recent events and developments in international politics" to the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, and this constituted a unique opportunity to publicly mark the distinction between his position and that of Berlin. It was an opportunity from which Ciano expected significant

results.

In reality, the speech that the foreign minister delivered on December 16 in the Chamber of Deputies is more significant as a demonstration of the balancing act that “non-belligerence” entailed and of the difficulties—not to say the impossibility—of translating it into coherent long-term political action, especially if its outcome was to be what Ciano was aiming for, than for its actual consequences. Viewed from a historical rather than an emotional perspective, the only real insight to be gained from it is that it marked the moment of greatest crisis in Italian-German relations after August 25–26; once this point was reached, Ciano’s room for maneuver—since he could not move beyond the policy of waiting on which Mussolini had entrenched himself, and since this was possible only in a context of war stagnation such as that which followed the conclusion of operations against Poland—was irrevocably destined to diminish as the conflict regained momentum and expanded, and as the ambiguity of the “non-belligerence” formula diminished hopes for profitable business deals and, indeed, put the Italian economy in a difficult position. Forced not to burn his bridges with Germany—and, indeed, to reaffirm the validity of the “Pact of Steel”—Ciano’s disagreement with the Germans could only be expressed between the lines and indirectly. On the one hand, through the dual emphasis on the anti-communist “solemn political commitment” that Germany had undertaken—just as Italy and Japan had—by signing the “Anti-Comintern Pact,” and on the “limited scope” that had been assigned to the German-Soviet rapprochement during the Italian-German talks in April and May. On the other hand, by denying that Italy’s non-intervention in the conflict had been determined by military unpreparedness and the Italian people’s fear of war, and instead attributing it to the commitment—made in Milan by von Ribbentrop and by himself at the time of deciding on the alliance—to “not provoke new international controversies” for three to five years: contrary to these “malicious insinuations,” the position adopted by Italy on September 1 was therefore, for Ciano, “strictly derived from the Pacts as well as from the existing collateral commitments between Italy and Germany,” and consequently relations between Italy and Germany remained “those established by the Alliance Pact and the exchanges of views that accompanied it”2M. It is therefore easy to understand why the speech’s impact was much less significant and largely different from what Ciano had hoped for and from the expectations it had raised. Domestically, despite the enormous prominence given to it by the regime’s mass media 285 and Ciano’s own initial enthusiastic assessments (“If it was difficult before to persuade the Italians to take the field alongside Germany, it is now impossible that, having learned the profound truth and all the background details, the promise they were given would not serve as a motivating factor. Everyone has understood and knows that it was Germany that betrayed us twice... The Italians, moreover, being the most intelligent of all, have fully grasped my message and regard the speech as the true funeral of the Axis”2W), only a few noted

285 For the main comments in the Italian press, see *L’Italia di fronte al conflitto*. Speech by Count Galeazzo Ciano, Minister of Foreign Affairs. December 16, 1939. With an appendix of documents, Milan 1940, pp. 233 ff. The entire volume, published
by iSPi, is worth consulting for its appendix of documents, which makes it a sort of “colorful” book on “non-belligerence.”

“all the subtle anti-German poison.” What truly had an impact on the masses was the reaffirmation of the validity of the Axis; the rest was either not grasped, took a back seat, or, at best, served only to suggest that for the moment there was still no danger—certainly not to truly reassure people, much less to create a consensus around Ciano that could strengthen his political position. Outside the regime’s elite, throughout the country, Ciano’s reputation had long since been so discredited that even those who did not share Mussolini’s policies still had more confidence in him than in his son-in-law, whom they viewed in the same light as they had, until recently, viewed Starace: either a passive instrument of the

“Duce’s” will or the cause of many of his greatest mistakes. The British and French reactions were no better. Although they were aware of the difficulties and contradictions plaguing Fascist policy, three and a half months after the outbreak of the conflict and following the failure of Germany’s “peace offensive” in October, everyone—and especially the French, who had been virtually ignored in the speech despite their declarations of willingness to discuss Italian demands—had hoped for something more. Certainly not in an announcement of a break with Germany, but at least in a more effective distancing from it. And François-Poncet did not fail to make this clear to Ciano, complaining that he had placed too much emphasis on solidarity with Germany.[2] As for the British, in addition to disappointing them, the speech must have struck them as incomprehensible and troubling, especially because of Ciano’s assertion that Italy did not believe that in the Danube-Balkan region “the formation of blocs of any kind could be useful either to the countries that would be part of them or to the higher goal of hastening the restoration of peace.” Incomprehensible (especially in light of the statement issued at the conclusion of the last Grand Council), because until then Italy had advocated for a bloc of neutral nations in this region, and such a bloc would have served Rome very well had it truly wished to strengthen its role as the leading neutral great power on the continent. This was troubling because both possible explanations for this about-face—that Mussolini did not actually wish to break with Germany, or that he wanted to secure concrete advantages in the Balkans, 288, counting on the fact that, given his position, Berlin would not prevent him from doing so—ran counter to Anglo-French interests. This is demonstrated by the fact that, through Dingli, Chamberlain hastened to ask Ciano for an explanation. The message 289 was couched in very cordial terms, full of acknowledgments of the “historic significance” and the “indisputable interest” of his speech, and concluded with the assurance that, “in any case,” the prime minister wished “not to hinder Italy in any way”; the very fact of asking the question—and doing so through the “secret channel”—shows, however, just how alarmed London was and that it actually viewed Ciano’s speech as anything but positive. Thus, ultimately, the Foreign Minister’s speech ended up being substantially counterproductive. On the one hand, it deeply irritated and further alarmed Berlin; on the other hand, it confirmed to London—and in particular to the Foreign Office (but also to Chamberlain, since in early January he decided to inform the Foreign Office of the existence of the “secret channel” and to bring it under his authority)—that their stance was correct, prompting them not to deviate from it and, indeed, to step up the naval blockade to put Rome in an economic and political bind; and thirdly, given these results, it prompted Mussolini to personally resume control of foreign policy.

288 A fairly telling indication of British concerns and assessments regarding Italian policy in the Danube-Balkan region is provided by the aforementioned report to the Foreign Office from the Embassy in Rome dated January 2, 1940, which was intercepted by Italian intelligence. It reads: “4. With regard to c(i), Count Ciano’s speech provides the key, both in general terms and with respect to the nuances of Italy’s sentiments toward each of the Danubian and Balkan states. Italy wishes for the Balkan and Danubian region to remain untouched and uninvolved. It rejects the formation of a bloc (perhaps because it has found it impossible to form one under its own leadership). It demands that its German ally not interfere in the region; it views any Russian advance there with hostility. It might cooperate with the Western Powers to block a Russian advance; it will not cooperate with them in an anti-German alliance. It shows a particular interest in the entire area and makes it clear that those who wish to intervene there will have to take its political interests—and perhaps its military power—into account. It also recognizes—and this is a new development—that the area constitutes a single unit, and that a blow to one of its components would threaten that very unity.

“5. With regard to c (2), we have three points. It is denied here that there is any plan for a personal union between Italy and Hungary, or to place the Duke of Aosta on the Hungarian throne. Second, it seems fairly certain that Italy has obtained assurances from Berlin that Germany will not invade

Hungary. Third, there can be no doubt—and indeed it seems implicit in Count Ciano's remarks—that Italy has promised Hungary its support should it be attacked, at least by Russia.

"As for Germany's non-intervention in Hungary, I believe that Italy has, out of deference to Germany, abandoned the plan for a personal union, etc., but at the same time, I believe it has made it clear to Berlin that any attempt by Germany to swallow up Hungary—after having swallowed up Austria, Czechoslovakia, and a third of Poland—would mean the end of the Italian-German alliance and Italy's resumption of its complete freedom of action.

"If this is indeed the case, Italian support for Hungary has a diplomatic-military character with regard to Russia; but a purely diplomatic one with regard to Germany.

"6. As for c (3), we now know that Germany will not aid Romania against a Russian attack, but that Italy is at least considering providing such aid if Romania resists with arms. In this regard, the Russian setbacks in Finland must have encouraged Italy, in my opinion, to adopt a more energetic and positive stance. However, in the event that Russia does indeed attack Romania, that Italy decides to provide military aid to Romania, and that the Western Powers feel compelled to come to Romania's aid as well, the situation becomes very complicated. It seems hardly conceivable that Italy and the Western Powers would act independently or without collaborating and coordinating their respective activities. Yet in such a case, we would witness the peculiar spectacle of Germany tacitly allowing military collaboration between its Italian ally and its Western enemies against its Russian ally. In this scenario, Germany's countermove would likely consist of colluding with Russia and attempting to persuade Italy to join forces with Russia to divide up the Balkan spoils. But even in that case, Germany might face a refusal, which could lead to the breakdown of its alliance with Italy; for it seems hardly credible that Italy would want to risk its entire position in the Mediterranean—as would happen if it antagonized England and France—for such a dubious venture, nor that it would risk the loss of respect and prestige at home and abroad that it would incur by allying with Russia and abandoning the fight against communism, which it has now undertaken more irrevocably than before."

At the Council of Ministers meeting on January 23, 1940—the session devoted to military issues and during which, as mentioned, he alluded to his theory of the "parallel war"—Mussolini focused, among other things, on two issues: the serious difficulties created by the naval blockade ("But the most worrying thing is the lack of raw materials. There aren't enough of them; and obtaining them is becoming increasingly difficult. British naval control is becoming increasingly strict") and that of "sealing off the borders"—especially the northern one—by equipping them with a triple line of fortifications: at the valley floor ("the most massive and definitive"), halfway up the slope ("of medium resistance"), and on the watersheds ("against infiltration")". In the absence of other, more direct and precise evidence, and given the conflicting interpretations that have been offered of the letter Mussolini wrote to Hitler on January 5, 1940,291, to understand why, in the last days of December, Mussolini was led to believe that the time had come to put an end to the policy of waiting and to Ciano's futile attempts to improve relations with London—and instead to take an explicit step toward Hitler—it seems appropriate to start with these two facts. They prove, in fact, that Mussolini (a) realized that, given the naval blockade and the British attitude toward Italy, Italian rearmament could not take place within the timeframe (and, probably, to the extent) he had initially anticipated; b) that, despite this, he had no intention whatsoever of shortening the duration of "non-belligerence" and siding with Germany in the near future; on the contrary, he feared that the Germans might try to force his hand and even take action against him. Hence—since he was determined not to break with Germany—he needed to act in a

timely manner to take decisive action aimed at persuading Hitler to allow him to attempt genuine and serious mediation and, above all, to dissuade him from any intention of resuming the war on a large scale, since this would obviously have made negotiations impossible. This, in our view, was the genesis of Mussolini's political "comeback" and his letter to Hitler dated January 5. A letter that must have cost the "Duce" dearly, given that—whether he had changed his mind or was doing so to try to convince Hitler—it contradicted more than one position he had previously maintained in his dealings with the Germans.

Letter 292 addressed a whole series of issues. It opened with a declaration of full agreement with Ciano's speech to the Chamber of Deputies and concluded with a reaffirmation of Italy's loyalty to the alliance and of Mussolini's willingness to participate, if necessary, in the conflict, even though nothing was said about when Italy's military preparations would be completed and intervention was contingent upon the arrival of the "most advantageous and decisive moment":

I am stepping up the pace of military preparations. Italy cannot and does not wish to engage in a protracted war; its intervention must take place at the most advantageous and decisive moment. In East Africa, Italy is tying down significant French forces in Djibouti and in the neighboring British colonies. The 15 divisions in North Africa (8 from the regular Army, 4 from the National Corps, and 3 Libyan) are engaging 80,000 Anglo-Egyptian-Indian troops and 250,000 French troops. In the Alps, our forces have been withdrawn due to the snow, but not reduced in strength, and face between 1 and 15 French divisions.

Fascist Italy intends, at this time, to serve as your reserve:

from a political and diplomatic standpoint, should you wish to reach a political and diplomatic solution;

from an economic standpoint, by assisting you as much as possible in everything that can sustain your resistance to the blockade;

from a military standpoint, when such aid is not a burden but a relief. And this issue must be examined by the military.

I believe that Italy's non-intervention has been and remains far more useful to Germany than an intervention that was entirely superfluous in the war against Poland.

I want the German people to be convinced that Italy's stance is in line with—not at odds with—the Alliance Pact.

The central part of the letter, however, revolved entirely around two closely interrelated issues: the impossibility for the Axis, on the one hand, of achieving a complete victory over the Anglo-French, and, on the other hand, of sacrificing and renouncing its own ideological principles on the altar of the tactical advantages gained through the German-Soviet pact. On the first point, Mussolini was explicit, almost brutal:

I am deeply convinced that Great Britain and France will never succeed in forcing your Germany—aided by Italy—to capitulate, but it is not certain that we will succeed in bringing the Anglo-French to their knees or even in dividing them. To believe so is to delude oneself. The United States would not allow a total defeat of the democracies. Empires collapse due to internal instability, while external shocks can actually strengthen them. A war outcome is foreseeable that, as you have said, will see only

two or more defeated parties. Is it worth it—now that you have secured your eastern borders and created the great Reich of 90 million inhabitants—to risk everything—including the regime—and to sacrifice the flower of the German generations to hasten the fall of a fruit that is bound to fall anyway and will have to be harvested by us, who represent the new forces of Europe? The great democracies carry within themselves the seeds of their own decline.

In addressing the second Mussolini, he did not shy away from any political or ideological argument or any rhetorical device, going so far as to assume the tone of the "master of fascism" who called on Hitler to respect what he had said and written in the past and to fulfill his mission of securing Germany's "living space" in the East:

No one knows better than I—with my 40 years of political experience—that politics has its own tactical demands. Even revolutionary politics. I recognized the Soviets in 1924; in 1934, I signed a treaty of trade and friendship with them. Thus, I understand that, since von Ribbentrop's predictions regarding the non-intervention of the French and British did not come to pass, you avoided a second front. Russia, in Poland and the Baltic, has been—without firing a shot—the great beneficiary of the war.

But I, who was born a revolutionary and have not changed my mindset, tell you that you cannot permanently sacrifice the principles of your Revolution to the tactical demands of a particular political moment. I feel that you cannot abandon the anti-Semitic and anti-Bolshevik banner that you have flown for 20 years and for which so many of your comrades have died; you cannot renounce your gospel, in which the German people have blindly believed. I have a clear duty to add that any further step in your relations with Moscow would have catastrophic repercussions in Italy, where anti-Bolshevik sentiment—especially among the fascist masses—is absolute, unshakable, and indivisible.

Let me believe that this will not happen. The solution to your Lebensraum lies in Russia and nowhere else. Russia, with its immense territory of 21 million square kilometers and 9 inhabitants per square kilometer. It is foreign to Europe. Despite its size and population, Russia is not a strength; it is a weakness. The bulk of its population is Slavic and Asian. In the old days, the unifying element was the Balts; today, it is the Jews—but that explains everything. Germany's task is this: to defend Europe from Asia. This is not merely Spengler's thesis. Until four months ago, Russia was the world's number one enemy; it cannot have become—and is not—the number one friend. This has deeply unsettled the fascists in Italy and perhaps even many National Socialists in Germany.

The day we have demolished Bolshevism, we will have remained true to our two Revolutions. Then it will be the turn of the great democracies. They will not be able to survive the cancer that is eating away at them and manifesting itself on the demographic, political, and moral levels.

At first glance, having made these two points, the letter seemed to lack a conclusion; it appeared to leave everything to Hitler's conscience and decisions, without asking for or offering anything, amounting to nothing more than a warning—one that was, moreover, contradictory given its conclusion—from the older and wiser dictator to the younger and more inexperienced one. In reality, if one knows how to read it—and we know that Hitler and the Nazi leadership read it, reread it, and annotated it carefully—it was not only an offer of mediation but also put forward, for this purpose, both two specific proposals and a fundamental perspective. The proposals were to reconstruct a semblance of an independent Polish state (so as to allow London and Paris to save face) and to take no military action in the west. However, Mussolini—probably fearing that a "no" from Hitler would make it difficult for him to revisit the subject later—did not present them clearly, but rather dropped them almost inadvertently while discussing the themes of Franco-British propaganda, its effects, and how to counter

it:

But British propaganda emphasizes two facts: namely, the German-Russian agreements, which effectively mark the end of the Anti-Comintern Pact, and the treatment that the genuinely Polish populations would receive in Poland. In this regard, German counter-propaganda appears belated and weak. A people that has been ignominiously betrayed by its wretched political and military leadership, but which—as you yourself gallantly acknowledged in your speech in Danzig—has fought courageously, deserves treatment that gives no cause for hostile speculation. It is my conviction that the creation of a modest, unarmed, exclusively Polish Poland—freed from the Jews, for whom I fully endorse your plan to gather them all into a large ghetto in Lublin—can never again pose a danger to the great Reich. But this fact would be a factor of great importance that would remove any justification for the great democracies to continue the war and would put an end to the ridiculous Polish republic created by the Franco-British in Angers. Unless you are irrevocably determined to wage war to the bitter end, I believe that the creation of a Polish state under German auspices would be a decisive factor in ending the war and a sufficient condition for peace.

You could—as, indeed, your daily radio broadcasts to the French do—reaffirm that you have no war aims in the west and thus shift the responsibility for the continuation of the conflict onto the Franco-British before the world, and in any case refrain, as you have done thus far, from taking the initiative on the Western Front.

As for the underlying perspective, it was implicit in the entire discussion on relations with the USSR: what would have prompted England and France (and, behind them, the U.S.) to conclude peace and to trust that Germany would respect it would have been the fact that, with peace in the West, Germany would finally have found its “living space” in the East and, in doing so, would also free them from the thorn in their side that was the USSR and Bolshevism—and consequently from that of Japan as well, which would likewise be diverted toward the Asian regions of the USSR.

As soon as he was informed of the “Duce’s” decision to write to Hitler, Ciano became alarmed 294:

Mussolini always has these Germanophile relapses: now he wants to write a letter to Hitler to offer some advice (which hasn’t been heeded much so far!) and to say that he continues to prepare. For what? War alongside Germany must not happen and will never happen: it would be a crime and sheer folly. As for opposing it, I don’t see any reasons for that at the moment. In any case, if anything, against Germany. Never alongside it. That is my point of view. Mussolini’s is exactly the opposite: never against Germany, and, when we’re ready, together to overthrow the democracies—which, on the contrary, are the only countries with which one can conduct serious and honest politics.

Later, however, he changed his mind. Having read an early draft, he had found it “not too compromising,” and, after Mussolini had made some changes to it, he had called it “an excellent document, full of wisdom and moderation”—though it would have no effect, because, as he wrote in his diary, “Mussolini’s advice is accepted by Hitler only when it coincides exactly with his own thinking” 295.

In making this prediction, Ciano was not mistaken. The letter, delivered by Attolico to Hitler on January 8, 296, made a profound impression in Berlin. As already mentioned, Hitler had his principal collaborators read it; they annotated it, discussed it, and tried to interpret it in every possible way, even drawing on the insights of Attolico and Magistrati, who were themselves eager to gauge its impact. More than one member of the Nazi leadership must have shared, in whole or in part, the spirit of the

letter; yet, as Admiral Canaris had immediately foreseen,[297] it did not succeed in persuading Hitler to revoke his orders for the offensive against France. Moreover, Mussolini's assertion in the letter that Germany could not "bring to its knees" England and France gave fresh fuel to suspicions and fears regarding Italy's true stance and Mussolini's actual ability to overcome internal opposition to Italian intervention, and raised doubts in many minds that Italy's behavior in late August—rather than being due to military unpreparedness, as Mussolini and Ciano claimed—had been determined by such opposition and that the situation might recur. So much so that—when the suspicion even crept, albeit indirectly, onto Göring's lips — even Ciano found himself forced to take remedial action, ordering the embassy in Berlin to dispel it and to reaffirm that the reasons for "non-belligerence" were solely "of a purely military nature" and that they did not prevent "the continuation of those relations of close friendship that unite the two countries and of which, within the limits of our possibilities, we are continually giving proof to Germany" 298.

The best evidence of the problems and fears that Mussolini's letter aroused in Berlin, however, lies in the fact that for two months it received no reply. Uncertain as to what the "Duce" had truly intended with it and, in any case, wishing to prevent him as much as possible from taking unwelcome initiatives, Hitler preferred to wait to respond until the moment that was most favorable to him—when it would be more difficult for Mussolini to counter him. On March 10, when von Ribbentrop arrived in Rome, finally bearing the reply and, more importantly, an invitation for a meeting between the two dictators at the Brenner Pass, at least four reasons must have led Hitler to believe that this moment had arrived and that, therefore, he should and could now induce Mussolini to define his position and make specific commitments.

The first of these reasons was the imminent conclusion of the Finnish-Soviet conflict (which occurred on March 12). With it, in fact, the danger—which for several weeks had influenced virtually the entire international situation—of an Anglo-French military intervention in aid of Finland (seriously considered and prepared by London and Paris but then abandoned for a series of technical and political reasons) faded away. Such an intervention would undoubtedly have given the Anglo-French-German conflict an entirely new character and could have provided Italy with a serious ideological-political reason to denounce the "Pact of Steel," whereas now the conclusion of peace between the USSR and Finland would inevitably lead to a softening of Italy's stance toward the Soviet Union 299.

The second reason was the now evident failure of the trip to Europe undertaken by Sumner Welles, whom Roosevelt had tasked with trying to ascertain the actual positions of the Germans, French, British, and Italians, and whether there was any possibility of reaching a peace and a settlement of international economic relations that could, as the American president had long envisioned, make it stable. From the outset, Welles's mission[300] had not been an easy one; Berlin had greeted the announcement with obvious coldness; London and Paris with perplexity and some apprehension; only Rome with genuine sympathy, even though the regime's press had, for obvious reasons, given it very little coverage[301]. Nor, in reality, did it have much chance of success, unless—as Welles would acknowledge four years later in his book *The Time for Decision*—Roosevelt's envoy had been able to accompany his fact-finding mission with an explicit declaration to Hitler that, if no agreement were reached, the U.S. would enter the war alongside England and France—a declaration that, however, not even Roosevelt (who, moreover, was about to face re-election as president) could make at that moment, given the distinctly isolationist stance of U.S. public opinion 302. In Rome, where he had begun his tour, Welles had been received very cordially on February 26 by both Ciano and Mussolini 303. Ciano, while showing no particular sympathy for the British and the French, had made no secret of his anti-German sentiments and of his skepticism regarding the possibility of an agreement. Mussolini, on the other hand (whom Welles found to be much aged and quite tense), had said he considered it possible,

provided the conflict had not turned into a “real war,” with massacres and devastation that would have made peace negotiations impossible for a long time. He had also outlined to Welles certain aspects of the agreement he considered possible: Danzig, the Corridor, and the Polish territory inhabited by the German minority would be assigned to Germany; the same for Austria (possibly after a plebiscite, which, in any case, would have favored the Anschluss) and for the Sudetenland; independence, but demilitarization, for Bohemia-Moravia and Slovakia; reconstruction of Poland in its central core, inhabited by “true” Poles and where those from the regions that had come under the USSR could resettle (“What other solution is there,” he said, “unless we are all ready to fight Russia?”); the return of Germany’s former colonies to Germany; and, at the same time, the satisfaction of “Italy’s just demands.” According to the report that Welles had sent to Washington that same day, Mussolini is said to have expressed himself in these terms, which are also highly significant for understanding the effects that the British naval blockade had on him:

305 See ibid., pp. 108 ff., as well as FRUS, 1940, I, pp. 21 ff. and *L’Europa verso la catastrofe*, op. cit., pp. 508 ff. (only regarding the conversation with Mussolini). G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 399, paints a picture of the meeting between Mussolini and Welles as cold and distant, which does not match Welles’s accounts.

And when peace negotiations begin, Italy’s just claims must be met. I have not put them forward now because that madhouse that Europe is today could not withstand further upheaval. But there can be no real peace until Italy has free passage and access to the Mediterranean. You have just arrived on the Rex. You were detained by the British, and the mail and passengers were taken away. You have seen for yourself that in the western Mediterranean we are prisoners of the British. Do you also understand that an Italian cannot send a ship from Trieste, an Italian port, to Massawa, another Italian port, without the British seizing half the cargo? How would you like it if the British did that to your ships sailing regularly between New York and New Orleans?

After Rome, Welles had been in Berlin, where his mission had completely failed: both von Ribbentrop and Hitler had in fact proved intractable, had placed all the blame for the war on the Anglo-French, and had shown themselves confident of a German victory 305. While von Ribbentrop arrived in Rome with Hitler’s reply to Mussolini’s letter of January 5, Sumner Welles was in Paris, about to continue on to London and then return to Rome and from there to the United States 306. After the outcome of the Berlin leg, however, these other stops had practically lost all value, at least for the purposes of what had been the primary objective of the U.S. undersecretary’s mission. At best, the most important one turned out to be the last one: since the primary objective had failed, what became most important was to at least try to influence Mussolini so that he would not enter the war and, to this end, to coordinate U.S. action with that of the Holy See as much as possible 307.

The third reason why Hitler must have believed the time had come to respond to Mussolini was the ever-increasing difficulties Italy was facing as a result of the naval blockade.[308] In the first weeks of the conflict, the British had not overreached and had seriously considered the possibility of supplying Italy with the necessary coal, both to make it increasingly independent of Germany and, as the Ministry of Economic Warfare had written to the embassy in Rome on November 25 309, to “reduce the risk that British orders for war materiel, etc., might suffer delays in fulfillment as a result of the fuel shortage faced by the Italian factories responsible for supplying them.” Consequently, even the Italian protests had been, all things considered, quite moderate and primarily a matter of principle. The extension of the blockade to German goods shipped from neutral ports, on November 28, had, however, aggravated the situation, even though the British had still taken care to make it less burdensome for the Italians (in practice, German coal shipped from Rotterdam had continued to pass through) and to compensate for

the damage by proposing agreements allowing them to use Italian ships “for Allied purposes” and by not opposing Italian penetration into markets left uncovered by Germany. Nevertheless, in December, January, and February, there were numerous Italian complaints and protests (especially regarding the diversion of ships and the long delays imposed on them by inspections). At the same time, negotiations over coal supplies had become difficult, since while the Italians wanted to pay primarily with food supplies (fruit, vegetables, wine, etc.), the British insisted on receiving military or paramilitary supplies in exchange (mercury, sulfur, hemp, etc.), and extremely tempting purchase offers (especially in the aeronautical field) were made in this regard; however, in early February, Mussolini had decided to reject them, partly as a “matter of principle” and partly due to violent German protests. The most serious consequences, however, were of a psychological and political nature. In Italian business circles —and not only there—the blockade had in fact sparked widespread hostility and reawakened old grudges against the British, against whom Ciano had been able to do very little, given that, objectively speaking, the blockade weighed heavily on the Italian economy and dashed the hopes of those who had seen neutrality as a means to do good business and revitalize the national economy. In this regard, it is extremely significant that on February 18—in anticipation of the tightening of the blockade being considered in London for March 1—Ambassador Loraine had telegraphed the Foreign Office[310]:

305 In Berlin, S. Welles also had other meetings; among them, the one with von Weizsäcker is of particular interest to us, as von Weizsäcker made it clear to him that only Mussolini could exert any influence over Hitler, provided he could speak to him directly and without von Ribbentrop’s knowledge, since von Ribbentrop would otherwise neutralize that influence: see S. Welles, *Decisive Hours*, op. cit., pp. 137–

306 During his meetings in Paris and London, Welles also had the opportunity to discuss relations with Italy. Daladier confirmed his willingness, in the event of an agreement, to grant Italy the port of Djibouti, the section of the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway on Ethiopian territory, adequate representation on the Suez Canal authorities, and special rights for Italians residing in Tunisia. See FRUS, 1940, I, p. 67. In London, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs R. A. Butler, in turn, expressed his conviction (speaking with Welles’s chief aide, P. Moffat) that—again, in the event of peace—the settlement of relations with Italy could be expedited: “Suez should not pose any difficulty, and, with the possible exception of Gibraltar, he saw no insurmountable obstacle. Furthermore, Mussolini was growing old and, in any case, was no longer on the rise. Italy did not wish to join the Allies in war, but it did wish to join them in peace.” See “Diary of trip to Europe with Sumner Welles,” f. 45, in P. P. Moffat, Houghton Papers, 21 840 – S. Welles, 134, Harvard University Library.

307 Almost simultaneously with Welles’s trip, Roosevelt had decided to accredit his own personal representative to the Vatican in the person of Myron Taylor, with the aim of establishing a direct channel with the Holy See in order to coordinate their respective efforts in favor of peace and to prevent Italian intervention. See E. Aga Rossi, *Vatican Policy During World War II*. Research guidelines and unpublished documents on Myron Taylor’s mission, in “Storia contemporanea,” October–December 1975, pp. 881 ff.; E. Di Nolfo, The Vatican and the United States, 1939–1952 (from the papers of Myron C. Taylor), Milan 1978.

308 There are no recent studies on the repercussions of the naval blockade on Italian-British relations; however, the sections devoted to this topic by G. Vedovato in *The European Conflict and Italian Non-Belligerence*, Florence 1943, remain useful. There is, however, a wealth of documentation in the DDI volumes, particularly, for the period of interest here, Volumes II and III of Series IX.

Regarding the political consequences: - Although pro-German sentiment has not increased, our control over smuggling, the interception of mail, and German propaganda have fueled latent factors of Anglophobia. Mussolini could, if he wished, accuse us of being responsible for having seriously damaged the Italian economy by causing a coal shortage and, consequently, for all the ills stemming from this. I still believe that he will try to maintain his freedom of maneuver until the very end, but if, as many believe, he backs down from the responsibility of exposing an inadequately armed Italy to German aggression, he might perhaps resort to the alternative of shifting the blame onto us, so that the Germans will tell him to declare war on us and fight for his own survival.

In fact, in my opinion, we are approaching a crisis, and the measures you intend to implement on March 1 will have the effect of bringing us even closer to the critical moment. Will the result be popular support for the Regime in an anti-British vein, or will it be a revolt against the Regime? For now, I dare not predict.

In this already grave situation, the British decision—clearly aimed at forcing Mussolini's hand and compelling him to finally distance himself from Berlin—to end, as of March 1, the exemptions from the blockade previously granted to Italian ships loading German coal in Rotterdam had placed Italy in an extremely serious predicament. In practice, Mussolini had to decide within a very short time (in the face of Italian protests—thirteen ships immediately stopped at sea by the British had been released, but Ciano had been informed that those that had not yet loaded their cargo would be blocked and the coal they were transporting seized) whether to resign himself to depending almost entirely on German coal supplies by land or to agree to supply the British, in exchange for their coal, with the war materials they requested, with the obvious political consequences that both solutions entailed.

The fourth and final reason why Hitler wanted clarification from Mussolini was closely linked to the military operations he was about to undertake. The Anglo-French entry into the war had come as a surprise to Hitler (and was a further source of irritation toward Italy, since he was convinced that the British decision to enter the war had been determined essentially by the fact that they had been informed of Mussolini's decision not to intervene), which had disrupted his plans and led him to what Fest termed his "withdrawal from politics": that is, his refusal to view the conflict and Germany's very fate in any terms other than, as he told his generals on November 23, 1939, a struggle in which the stakes were either "victory" or "destruction." Following this logic—and given the lack of enthusiasm for the conflict among the German people, the officer corps, and even certain Nazi leaders—what seemed essential to him was to achieve victory as soon as possible, since, while time had previously worked in Germany's favor, it was now working against it. This was true from both a political-strategic and a personal perspective: although certain arguments are irrational and unprovable, it is in fact highly likely that Fest was correct when he wrote that Hitler "felt" he would not live long; what is certain is that he was increasingly convinced (and he repeated this again on November 23) that Italy's stance and its participation in the conflict alongside Germany depended solely on Mussolini's survival. Hence his decision, as soon as the Polish campaign had ended, to proceed immediately with an attack on France and to neutralize it. Andreas Hillgruber has thus excellently summarized the motivations and prospects of this decision3,2:

311 The Italian note of protest, dated March 3, was notably published in full in *Relazioni internazionali* on March 9, 1940, p. 291, which also devoted the issue's editorial to it: "Italy's Protest to Great Britain."

On October 9, 1939, in one of his rare “memoirs,” he analyzed his own global “program” in relation to the actual situation brought about by the recent state of war—which he interpreted from a social-Darwinist perspective—and concluded that it was necessary to launch the offensive against France as soon as possible, that is, in November 1939. “As things stand, time... works more in favor of the Western powers than it does for us... No treaty and no convention can guarantee Soviet neutrality with certainty... The best guarantee against any Russian attack lies in highlighting German superiority and immediately demonstrating German power... The attempt by certain circles in the United States to incite the continent against Germany—undoubtedly futile for the moment—could achieve the desired effect in the future. Here, too, time seems to be working against us...” Hitler saw himself and his Grossreich rising to a global and geostrategic position almost midway between Russia and America. This international political situation—which had existed in potential since the Wilhelmine era but had temporarily receded into the background as a result of both the international economic crisis and the weakening of Russia caused by the revolution and Stalin’s “purges”—became relevant once again with the “Great Conflagration,” which, for Hitler, had broken out at an inopportune moment. Only through a swift intervention against France and the elimination of British influence on the continent, followed by an agreement with a new British government capable of recognizing Great Britain’s “true” interests (based on naval and imperial power and threatened not by a Germany dominating the European continent, but by the rise of U.S. power in the world), only by these means was it possible to turn a process—which, over time, would have worked to Germany’s detriment—in Germany’s favor, and thus regain, at least initially, freedom of action in the East.

Despite the objections and substantial opposition from the high command, Hitler had set the date for the offensive against France for mid-November 1939. If it was postponed—first by a few days and then gradually on numerous other occasions until it was finally set, for the last time, for January 20, 1940, after which everything was definitively postponed until spring—it was solely for technical reasons and, above all, due to bad weather, which would have made operations difficult and the large-scale deployment of the 3B Air Force impossible.

When Mussolini, concerned about the news filtering out of Germany, had written to him, Hitler still believed that the offensive would begin in a few days. Getting into an argument with the “Duce” at that moment was absurd and dangerous. It was far better not to respond and to postpone the issue until a more favorable time. Now, in early March, however, the situation was different; for Mussolini, for the reasons we have just mentioned—all of which worked in Hitler’s favor— for Hitler, because, with the start of the campaign against France now set without further delay—and, prior to that, the action against Denmark and Norway (aimed above all at ensuring Germany’s ability to receive, on a regular basis, the iron ores from Sweden that were indispensable to its war economy)—it had become necessary to resolve the issue of Italy’s stance—especially after Ciano’s policy had receivedexplicit endorsement of Mussolini, and Mussolini had written to Hitler in the terms we have seen—both because of the contribution Italy could make to the campaign in France (Hitler was confident of success, but even he did not foresee it being so rapid and easy), and because the Führer, while trusting Mussolini, could not be equally certain of the “Duce’s” actual freedom of action vis-à-vis the crown and the “machinations” of the anti-German party.

The announcement of von Ribbentrop’s visit came as a complete surprise in Rome. Ciano was irritated and concerned, considering it—given the delicate nature of relations with England over the coal issue—decidedly ill-timed. He immediately noted pessimistically[314]:

Frankly, I like it little or not at all. It will cause a tremendous stir in the world, and we shouldn’t be

adding fuel to the fire. Furthermore, I fear direct contact between the Germans and the Duce. Lately, he has intensified his hostility toward the Allies. The thought of war dominates him, and it will dominate him even more if the offensive on the Western Front begins. Inaction will clash even more sharply with his aggressive temperament. Under these circumstances, Ribbentrop will not need great oratorical skill to spur the Duce toward an undertaking he craves with all his heart.

Mussolini, on the other hand, told Ciano that he was satisfied with the visit, but in reality, he too must have had his share of concerns. On the evening of March 8, the day the announcement arrived, Pavolini found him very dejected,[315] which is hardly surprising. The information gathered by Attolico and Magistrati in Berlin over those two months left no room for doubt: Hitler's response to his letter would be a complete rejection. The Germans were determined to attack in the West, and everything suggested that when that happened, Italy's room for maneuver would be extremely limited. Contrary to what Ciano thought, however, Mussolini—despite the contradictions in his state of mind—was by no means willing to yield to German enticements or to make specific commitments regarding his involvement. This is demonstrated not only by his subsequent behavior but also by a note he drafted in preparation for the meeting with von Ribbentrop[3],[6] and by the caution in the instructions Pavolini gave to the press on how to frame the visit.[317]

The visit lasted two days, and von Ribbentrop met twice with Mussolini and Ciano. The first time, on March 10, he delivered the letter from Hitler that he was carrying and did most of the talking to explain its contents.

The letter, which was quite long[318], was less a specific reply to Mussolini's letter and more a sort of overview designed to indirectly refute the "Duce's" arguments, reaffirm the concept already presented to Ciano that the outcome of the war would determine "the future of Italy as well," emphasize Hitler's certainty of ultimate victory and the need to achieve it at any cost, given that England and France had "no other war aim than the annihilation of totalitarian states" and that, therefore, only a complete victory could definitively put an end to the designs of the "criminal plutocratic clique" that guided them. All of this was accompanied by two recurring assertions: "full understanding" for Mussolini's stance and decisions in August, recognition of the "relief" they provided for the German war effort, and full willingness to do everything possible to help Italy with the coal issue "which perhaps holds a special interest for you." As for the specific issues addressed in the letter, three seem particularly worth noting. The first concerns the Anglo-French intervention, which Hitler vigorously denied had taken him by surprise—a denial that demonstrates how keen he was to dispel any notion Mussolini might have had that Germany had not entered the war fully prepared to bear its full burden and win it. The issue of the agreements with the USSR, presented solely in terms of the direct strategic and economic advantages they provided to Germany, while assuring Mussolini that National Socialism was "totally immune to any attack by Bolshevik ideology" and unwilling to make any concessions, either on the ideological front or regarding an expansion of the "sphere of interest" recognized for the Soviets. And the issue of the situation in the Balkans, regarding which Hitler expressed himself in a way that, in our view, reveals a fear—not entirely unfounded[3'9] (consider, on the one hand, the absurdity that Hitler could truly believe Hungary was contemplating acting alone against Romania, and, on the other hand, the fact that as early as the beginning of October Hitler had already made allusive and threatening remarks to Ciano), that Italy might be tempted to take advantage of the upcoming German offensive in the West to undertake some action in the Balkans, probably with Yugoslavia in mind:

3.7 In Pavolini's aforementioned report of March 9, 1939, we read: "For tomorrow morning, following the initial comment we made today regarding Ribbentrop's visit to Rome, it would be advisable to follow up with a greeting directed more toward the person himself—a greeting of cordiality and

courtesy.

“The rest of any comments tomorrow may be framed along the same lines as tonight’s, that is, emphasizing the complete normality of this visit within the framework of the alliance that remains intact between Germany and Italy, in accordance with the wording and spirit of the Grand Council’s resolution.

“Of course, it goes without saying that this visit (given the current situation and circumstances) is of particular importance. But we must not, on the eve of the visit and with absolutely no knowledge of the content of the talks, attempt to speculate in advance on what topics may be discussed.

“Foreign comments may, of course, be reported. As for the visit to the Pope, you will receive instructions.”

I was very pleased to learn, O Duce, that Count Ciano had used his good offices with Hungary to persuade it, first and foremost, to set aside its demands for revision (whether justified or not). I do not believe, O Duce, that a threat from the Balkans will arise on Russia’s part. I fear, however, that any attempt to fulfill a desire for revision would inevitably ignite the torch in this European region, and the fire could spread widely. Neither Italy nor Germany, however, can have any interest in such a fire.

In his presentation and commentary, von Ribbentrop emphasized four points in particular: 1) Germany was capable and “naturally willing” to supply Italy with all the coal it needed; even the problem of railcars could be overcome; thus, the “unprecedented attempt by the

319 On April 9, upon hearing the first reports of the German attack on Denmark and Norway, Mussolini did in fact consider for a moment taking advantage of the situation to resolve the Croatian question, confident that France and England would not intervene. See G. Ciano, Diario, op. cit., p. 417.

plutocratic-democratic states aimed at economically strangling Italy” would fail; 2) that the USSR posed absolutely no danger, not even in the Balkans; 3) that a negotiated peace was impossible since London and Paris wanted the destruction of the Nazi and Fascist regimes;

4) that “given this situation, the Führer is determined to break his adversaries’ will to destroy, and will therefore attack France and England at the moment he deems appropriate.” Von Ribbentrop said he was not informed of the date of the attack, but added that “on the German side, it is hoped that the French army will be defeated before fall and that no Englishmen will remain on the continent, except as prisoners of war.” As for Mussolini, he limited himself mainly to listening, making, in the end, very few comments, including that “the Führer is right when he states that the fates of the German and Italian nations are intertwined. The Western democracies make no distinction in their hostility toward the two countries.” 32. The following day,321 however, he went further. He showed himself more open to accepting the German viewpoint on relations with the Soviets and not opposed to an improvement in Italian-Soviet relations. Above all, however, he made several statements regarding Italy’s inability to avoid participating in the conflict, which alarmed Ciano somewhat but filled von Ribbentrop with joy; von Ribbentrop had left the previous day’s meeting perplexed about the “Duce’s” true intentions and convinced that, in any case, an Italian intervention was not foreseeable in the short term 322. According to the German minutes of the meeting—the only ones available and, likely, the only ones ever drafted—it appears that, in response to a remark by von Ribbentrop—who had stated that everyone in

Germany considered the possibility of Italian intervention alongside the Anglo-French, as in 1915, to be impossible and offensive—he said that it was “practically impossible for Italy to remain outside the conflict”:

When the time comes, it will enter the war and wage it alongside Germany and in parallel with it, because Italy, for its part, also has problems to resolve. He has addressed the issues of land borders; now he must turn to the issue of maritime borders, and never before has the need for Italy to have free access to the ocean been more evident than at this moment. No country is entirely free unless it has absolutely free access to the sea. Italy is, in a sense, enclosed in a prison whose gates are Corsica, Tunis, and Malta, and whose walls are represented by Gibraltar, Suez, and the Dardanelles. Italy is very patient and must remain so until it is ready, just as a boxer in the ring must at times know how to take many blows. The duration of this test of patience is growing ever shorter. Italy has made great strides in its armaments, and He will soon give the Italian people the opportunity to see with their own eyes what has been achieved in this field. He has sacrificed nearly his entire civilian life in order to make progress in armaments.

Some scholars have interpreted Mussolini’s words as evidence of his determination to enter the war and a commitment to do so quickly, in parallel with the German offensive against France, and have seen confirmation of this in the subsequent meeting at the Brenner Pass, proposed by von Ribbentrop for the third decade of the month at the Brenner Pass and accepted by Mussolini. And it cannot be entirely ruled out that von Ribbentrop interpreted them in the same way, which might explain why Hitler decided to request that the meeting at the Brenner Pass be moved up to March 18, 323. Ciano, though on high alert, did not, however, attach such significance to them; as evidenced by his diary, which, under the date of March 10, describes the conversation as “fairly cordial but without any enthusiasm on either side” and mentions a reserved Mussolini who, once alone with him, had told him not to believe in the German offensive and, in any case, not to believe in its “complete success,” and that he wished to “ponder the matter further,” so that Ciano could note with satisfaction: “For today, Ribbentrop has not scored any decisive advantage in the game” 324; nor does what he wrote under the date of the following day reveal any tone of alarm 325:

“The Duce,” Ciano noted, “spoke calmly, avoided grand statements, but could not refrain from reiterating certain commitments that are implicit in the current state of affairs—which he intends to maintain—and which are, above all, part of his deepest convictions.” He declared—while reserving the freedom to choose the date—that he intends to intervene in the conflict by waging a war parallel to Germany’s, that is, essentially by joining forces with Germany. The main reason for this is Italy’s isolation in the Mediterranean. Ribbentrop sought to clarify matters as much as possible, requesting that we reinforce our troops on the French border in order to bring about a concentration of forces on the other side. He then proposed, in the near future, a meeting between Hitler and Mussolini at the Brenner Pass. The Duce immediately accepted the proposal, which I currently consider dangerous due to its immediate consequences and its longer-term implications. I will try to discuss this further with the Duce.

Thus concluded Ribbentrop’s visit. If his aim was to strengthen the Axis, he succeeded. If, on the other hand, he intended to hasten our intervention, he did not achieve his goal, although Mussolini did make some new and unhelpful concessions.

Nor could Ciano have been mistaken.

It is clear—and this has been demonstrated—that Mussolini was convinced that, if a compromise peace

were not reached, Italy would have to enter the war on Germany's side. And it is certainly not without significance that he made his most "compromising" statements in the context of a speech aimed at reiterating that Fascist Italy was not the same as the Italy of 1914–15, whose government had "betrayed" the Allies. From this perspective, his words merely confirmed what he had already said and written to the Germans on several occasions. But he had not gone any further: he had not set any dates, nor had he made any commitments to hasten Italy's entry into the war. Ciano's testimony is explicit. From his point of view, the most compromising remark—the significance of which he would be so eager to assess the following day that he would press for the transcript of the meeting as soon as possible[3]—was the one regarding the progress of Italy's war preparations, which were making its "non-belligerence" "ever shorter." A remark, in truth, not very compromising, especially when one considers the need to offer the Germans some consolation so as not to lose all credibility with them, not to heighten their suspicions, and to secure the coal supplies he could not entirely do without—and the fact that Mussolini was too experienced a politician and too well-versed in German affairs not to realize that he would receive them only if his allies deemed it useful, so that the railcars needed for transport—which had become available as soon as the British had issued their ultimatum—could always be put to other uses* if the bait had not worked at least to some extent. This was all the more true since, later in the conversation, Mussolini had specified that he wanted to enter the war only when he was "fully prepared," so as "not to be a burden to his comrade." But the best evidence of how little Mussolini intended to enter the war at that time lies in the fact that he still thought he could dissuade Hitler at the Brenner Pass from going on the offensive127 and, if not, that he could obtain from him a sort of authorization not to intervene even in that case 328. And, most importantly, he did not limit himself to expressing these intentions to his son-in-law, but also laid them out on March 16 to Sumner Welles, who had returned to Rome after visiting Berlin, Paris, and London.

Once again, Roosevelt's envoy met with both Ciano and the "Duce"[3]W. The foreign minister was as candid as he was pessimistic with him. He made no secret of the fact that the Germans were on the verge of going on the offensive and expected to achieve victory within a few months, nor that Mussolini was completely pro-German. However, he also told Welles that he was by no means convinced of Germany's chances of victory and that he believed, in any case, Mussolini would not jeopardize Italy's position or change his policy. Indeed, he even begged Welles to postpone his departure from Rome until after the Brenner meeting, so that he could inform him of its outcome and of whatever he might learn from the Germans. After Ciano, Welles also met with the "Duce," whom he found in much better physical and mental condition than two weeks earlier ("it seemed as though a great weight had been lifted from him," he would write in his 1944 memoir, *33°*) and who spoke to him of his intention to try to dissuade Hitler from going on the offensive, since that would make any further efforts at reconciliation impossible; and—having learned that Roosevelt's envoy personally did not consider an agreement entirely impossible, even if difficult —he added that if he was to have any success in persuading Hitler to delay his military offensive, he must have some hope of telling him that the Allied governments would not prove completely intransigent, should negotiations begin, regarding the German insistence on "lebensraum." He wished to know whether I would authorize him to convey to Hitler the impressions I had formed regarding the possibility of a negotiated solution to the territorial and political problems in Europe.

Welles's response to this request was that he would have to consult with Roosevelt and that he would be more specific that evening; in any case, he did not believe an agreement was possible "unless a system of guarantees ensuring the agreement's implementation is first established." Mussolini's reply was that the issue of security could be addressed simultaneously with that of peace. And, as Welles was taking his leave, he added an extremely significant remark (as Welles himself noted in his report): "You may wish to bear in mind that while the Italian-German pact exists, I nevertheless retain complete

freedom of action”—by which he likely intended to refer to the telephone conversation Welles would have shortly thereafter with Roosevelt (and during which the president expressed his opposition to the “Duce’s” request), but which corresponds well with his intentions as they appear in Ciano’s notes from that same day[331]:

Today the Duce is calmer. He intends to confirm his potential solidarity with Germany, but does not intend to enter the war, at least for now. He said: “I will do as Bertoldo did. I accept the death sentence on the condition that I may choose the right tree from which to be hanged. Needless to say, I never find that tree. I will agree to enter the war, reserving the right to choose the opportune moment. I alone intend to be the judge of that, and much will depend on the course of the war.”

At the meeting at the Brenner Pass on the morning of March 18,312, after Roosevelt refused to authorize him to speak in any way—even on Roosevelt’s behalf—about the possibility of peace, Mussolini did not raise this issue. For the rest, he stuck to the “Bertoldo’s tree” strategy he had outlined two days earlier to his son-in-law. He tried to dissuade Hitler from launching an immediate offensive against France, arguing that in three or four months Italy’s greater military preparedness would spare him “the embarrassment of watching his comrades fight” without being able to participate in the struggle; however, he did not go beyond this approach (indirectly the most compromising statement he made during the entire meeting); and this was despite the fact that Hitler, while not having formally asked him to enter the war, much less to make a specific commitment regarding when he would intervene (and, indeed, having been careful to emphasize that he had not sought the meeting to ask for his help), had in practice tried in every way to persuade him to clarify his position—not so much with a view to the start of the German offensive (since Hitler, on the one hand, could by then have had little hope of an Italian intervention before a turning point in the conflict and, all things considered, must have cared relatively little about, given that it would have entailed disadvantages for Germany that might have outweighed the immediate advantages, and, on the other hand, was confident he could defeat France on his own), but rather regarding the moment when, with France on the verge of collapse, Italian intervention would be of great importance to him—and perhaps decisive—in persuading the French and, above all, the British to give up the fight, and although he had done so not only by repeating to him the speech he had already delivered to Ciano five and a half months earlier regarding Italy’s inability to become the leading Mediterranean power without directly collaborating in the defeat of England and France 333, but also—and above all—by presenting him with some specific “reflections” of his own on which to ponder. Among these, the one on which he probably relied most was the following:

132 There are two verbal accounts of the meeting, both drafted by the Germans. One, more extensive, was intended for the Führer and the Wilhelmstrasse; its original, which is heavily damaged, is reproduced in DGFP, s. D, IX, pp. 1 ff., and another, more concise and “sanitized” version that was subsequently sent to Rome at Mussolini’s urgent request (see P. Schmidt, *From Versailles to Nuremberg*, op. cit., pp. 449 ff.) and is included in *Europe Toward Catastrophe*, op. cit., pp. 545 ff.

333 It must have been in this context that Hitler said he was having serious difficulties with his collaborators in keeping the promises made to Italy for the postwar period. The remark was relayed to Thaon di Revel by Mussolini upon his return from the Brenner Pass; Mussolini must have been deeply impressed by it. See E. Faldella, *L’Italia e la seconda guerra mondiale. Revisione di giudizi*, Bologna 1960, p. 65.

“The war,” Hitler said 334, “would be decided in France. If France were defeated, Italy would rule the Mediterranean, and England would have to make peace.” The attack on France was therefore, for

geographical reasons, strategically very important for Italy. The danger remained that this campaign would cost a great deal of blood and yield little result. That is why it seemed preferable to him [the Führer] that, at the time of Italy's attack, a major Italian army should not strike the French border between Switzerland and the Mediterranean, but rather march alongside the German army and attack along the Rhône Valley parallel to the Swiss border, with the aim of outflanking the Franco-Italian front in the Alps by attacking it from the rear. Any frontal attack on this border would cost nothing but blood and would not be worthwhile. Sensational successes could be expected only from large-scale operations that would cause the enemy's defenses to collapse. This theory had proven valid in the East. In the West, the German army would clear the way, provided it could break through the Maginot Line at numerous points. This was a problem that had been studied in detail, and for which the troops had been trained. If such a breach could one day be opened, Italy would be able to launch its own offensive on the left flank behind the Franco-Italian front. The Germans had studied these possibilities from a purely theoretical standpoint and had concluded that an army of 20 divisions—which the Germans could transport within twenty to twenty-five days—could carry out this task if the French were already faltering. A 30 percent casualty rate was anticipated for the initial offensive. However, the intention was to annihilate the enemy or weaken him to such an extent that he would no longer be able to launch significant attacks before the end of the year. Given its substantial reserves, Germany was in a more favorable position and would attack in any case without hesitation. If the enemy were then destroyed, that would be the moment for an active Italian offensive—and certainly not, as he keeps repeating, in the most dangerous location, namely on the Alpine front, but elsewhere. The Duce could decide for himself whether to attack based on how the military situation developed. The Führer would provide him with regular, detailed reports to keep him informed of the situation. It might be advisable for the Duce and himself to have another brief conversation...

The Führer emphasized once again that he had not come to ask for help or to set a specific date for Italy's entry into the war. He had merely wished to share his reflections on the situation and the course of action that followed from it. He left it to the Duce to make all decisions based on the actual situation. If, for example, the danger persisted that Italy might become embroiled in the fighting before Germany could gain the upper hand in the West as quickly as it had anticipated, it would be better for Italy to remain out of the war for the time being. In any case, Germany had already made all necessary preparations in the event that its offensives were to become bogged down... However, should the decision still depend on a final effort—which could be made in collaboration with Italy—the methods would have to be coordinated in this case.

The fact that, however cornered he was, Mussolini had not made any specific commitment is proven beyond a shadow of a doubt by the German minutes of the meeting, which state on page 335:

335 Ibid., p. 15. The abridged minutes, sent to Rome (L'Europa verso la catastrofe, op. cit., p. 331), read as follows on this point: "Speaking of the collaboration between Germany and Italy, the Duce said

The Duce replied that he would attack immediately following an initial German victory, and when the Führer pointed out that he [the Duce] was certainly assessing the situation very well, the Duce assured him that he would not waste any time if scenario No. 1 were to arise—that is, if a German attack were to shake the Allies to such an extent that a second blow would bring them to their knees. As for the second scenario—that is, if Germany advanced only step by step—the Duce said he would wait. The Führer added that in this case, the time would come when Germany would need to recover and strengthen itself, and that it would then be wise for Italy to cover its back while awaiting the decisive moment.

This is confirmed by Ciano's diary (who was present throughout the meeting), in which, regarding Mussolini, it reads: "He speaks little and reaffirms his commitment to march alongside Germany. He reserves only the choice of the moment: 'Bertoldo's tree'"—and, regarding the general course of the meeting: "As far as we are concerned, the meeting has not substantially altered our position."[336] This does not mean, however, that the Brenner meeting had no repercussions and, more importantly, no far-reaching consequences.

We will not dwell on the repercussions in public opinion. Suffice it to say that in Italy, the meeting—coming immediately after Sumner Welles's two visits—initially rekindled hopes in many for an imminent peace; abroad, however, it was almost unanimously judged right away as a new step by Mussolini toward Hitler, especially after Chamberlain, on March 19, alluded to it in the House of Commons in a detached and almost contemptuous tone: "Whatever the outcome of this meeting, we are prepared to face it, and it is unlikely that we will be diverted from the purpose for which we entered the war" 337. The consequences that the meeting had for Mussolini's position—and more generally for the regime's leadership—deserve a much longer discussion.

As for Mussolini, there is no doubt that the meeting with Hitler had a profound effect on him—greater than what appears in Ciano's diary but is evident in the telegram he sent to the king 338 immediately upon his return to Rome:

Yesterday's meeting was very important, more so than I had anticipated. Hitler struck me as being in excellent mental and physical condition and, despite certain fluctuations, confident of victory. I do not, however, believe a ground offensive is imminent. As soon as I arrive from Berlin, I will send a report.

He reiterated that, as soon as Germany's military actions had created a favorable situation—according to the Führer's statements—he would intervene without delay. Should the German advance proceed at a slower pace, the Duce would wait until the moment when his intervention at the decisive hour could be of real help to Germany."

As is evident from this telegram and also from Ciano's diary,[339] Mussolini must have remained skeptical about the imminence of the German offensive and likely deluded himself into believing that his stance had helped avert it. In any case, Hitler must not have succeeded in convincing him that he was capable of defeating France, let alone doing so in a matter of months. While, after the Ethiopian affair, he no longer believed in the power of the British fleet, the French army remained for him one of the strongest—if not the strongest—armies in the world, that of the Marne, and the Maginot Line practically impregnable. That said, it is certain, however, that Hitler's confidence in ultimate victory and the lucid, calm tone of his "reflections"—so different from the almost hysterical tone of which so much was spoken—must have struck him deeply and led him to consider both the possibility that, even if he were mistaken about the extent and timing of his victory, the Führer might still be right, and what this would mean for him and for Italy. If Germany had won without Italian help, what would have become of Italy's territorial claims? Almost certainly, they would have faded into nothingness. And with them, the "mission" of Fascist Italy and his personal prestige—not only abroad but among Italians themselves. And this is without even considering the worst-case scenario: the possibility that sooner or later Hitler or his successors might make Italy pay the price for its "betrayal" and establish a foothold in the Mediterranean from Trieste. But even without considering the worst-case scenario, one thing was certain: in the event of a German victory without Italian aid, Italy's position would remain that of a second-rate power—and, moreover, in a Europe dominated and reorganized by Hitler solely according to German interests and based on a Nazi hierarchy of nations. Hence, what Ciano called his "pro-Germanism"—which was in reality a combination of admiration mixed with fear for Germany's power

and hostility toward England and France—grew stronger within him, which was increasingly exacerbated by the latest developments in the naval blockade,[341] both of which were intensified and reinforced by his ideological conviction that Germany's historical cycle was on the rise, while that of England and France was in decline. But, it should be noted, this did not yet lead him to consider putting his decision to intervene into action, for it remained, as he had told Hitler, strictly contingent upon the assurance that his

339 G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 408, as well as p. 414, where it appears that on April 1 Mussolini still intended to make a new attempt to dissuade Hitler from going on the offensive.

341 E. Faldella, *L'Italia e la seconda guerra mondiale*, op. cit., p. 61, rightly wrote that "if the government in London had wished to hasten Italy's intervention," it could have done nothing better than to implement—as it did—a tightening of the blockade.

Such an intervention would have been decisive and brief, nor—what is even more significant—would it have meant giving up the hope of avoiding it through political mediation, through a "second Munich," that would put an end to the conflict. This latter solution, in his view, remained the optimal one, and one he could not bring himself to abandon, deep down, for a whole series of rational, irrational, and personal reasons rooted, on the one hand, in the threefold awareness of the hostility that an intervention alongside Germany would encounter within the country and the regime, of Italy's lack of military preparedness, and of the grave difficulties into which a decisive German victory would in any case plunge Italy (whether or not it entered the war); on the one hand, in an instinctive fear of the Germans; and on yet another hand, in the psychological inability to shut all doors behind him and make decisions with no possibility of turning back. Thus, in essence, the true consequence of the Brenner meeting was his decision to present himself to the Germans in the best possible light and to accelerate the political preparations for intervention domestically, so as to reassure the Germans, push the Anglo-French to reconsider the possibility of a compromise peace, and, in the worst-case scenario, be able to meet the need for intervention on short notice. And this was done in a variety of ways: by slowing down trade negotiations with England; by requesting that the Germans supply one hundred anti-aircraft batteries to protect major cities; by encouraging the press to adopt a stance more favorable toward Germany and more critical of France and England; by making full use of the argument (undoubtedly deeply felt in certain circles) regarding the damage the naval blockade was inflicting on the national economy; and by using this to rekindle memories of the "unjust" sanctions with which, just four years earlier, the British and French had sought to starve and subdue Fascist Italy; reviving the term "Axis," which had almost completely disappeared from official political discourse in the preceding months; and, above all, "stepping on the gas" in the "moral and political preparation" of the Italian people. All of this, however, was done without burning bridges, without even pushing the "moral and political preparation" to its absolute limit. Suffice it to say that as late as April 21—that is, after the German attack on Denmark and Norway had caused the situation to take another leap forward—Mussolini would, indeed, have ordered a new "push" in the preparation of the Italian people ("Today I have only to confirm and repeat what I said in my 1939 speech to the squadristi: 'Italy keeps its word,' and I authorize you to repeat this to anyone. A man's worth is determined by his reputation; the same is true for nations"), but he would at the same time have clarified: "However, we must not dramatize or exaggerate the situation: we must remain calm and be ready"342.

It is in this light that two seemingly contradictory facts must be viewed and properly assessed: Mussolini's decision to give, so to speak, an official character to his decision to enter the war when the opportune moment arrived, and his giving Ciano the green light, a week later, to take a new and explicit step aimed at convincing London to authorize him to pressure Hitler into accepting a compromise

peace.

The “Duce” reached the first decision between his return from the Brenner Pass and the end of the month, entirely on his own and without even Ciano’s knowledge—who only learned of it between April 2 and 6, after the fact 343—and took concrete form in the aforementioned “top-secret memorandum” of March 31, addressed to the sovereign, Ciano, Badoglio, the three chiefs of staff—Graziani, Cavagnari, and Pricolo, and to the Minister for Italian Africa, Teruzzi—but which was also forwarded to Muti and General Soddu—in which Mussolini set forth the reasons why Italy—barring an “improbable” negotiated peace—could not fail to enter the war alongside Germany, and outlined the stance the armed forces should adopt on the various fronts. Although we have already referred to it, the document is of such importance that it is worth reproducing it in its entirety:

Top-Secret Memorandum 328 , Rome, March 31, 1940.

In a situation such as the current one, which could be described as extremely fluid, it is difficult—if not impossible—to make predictions about the course of events and the future phases of the war. We must allow ample room for the unexpected (see the Russo-Finnish War) and take into account what may happen in the politics of distant countries such as the United States or Japan.

A negotiated peace based on compromise.

As things stand, this possibility must be ruled out. It is true that strong pacifist currents are stirring publicly in England and covertly in France, but the Allies’ war aims are such—today—that a compromise is impossible. It could only begin with the acceptance of the “fait accompli” of the

343 On April 2, Mussolini told Ciano that he had drafted “a memorandum concerning our political-strategic plan of action,” that he would give him a copy, and that he intended to convene a meeting “of the seven individuals who will be privy to the document.” Mussolini handed him the text on April 6. See G. Ciano, Diario, op. cit., pp. 414–415. Two days earlier, Mussolini had sent it to Victor Emmanuel III with the following note: “Your Majesty, I take the liberty of enclosing herewith

1) a secret memorandum concerning the political-military situation and its foreseeable developments

2) the account of the conference between Hitler and myself at the Brenner Pass

3) two reports from our naval and air attachés in Berlin

4) a list of the British acts of harassment committed against us yesterday

5) a publication on the Apulian aqueduct, which is now complete.

“I am grateful, Your Majesty, to offer you my devoted respects” (ACS, B. Mussolini, Valigia, B. 1, Phase I). The two reports referred to in point 3) are those published in DDI, Vol. IX, III, pp. 550 ff. and 566 ff.

On the same day it was delivered to Ciano, the document was also brought to the attention of Badoglio and the three Chiefs of Staff.

German and Russian conquests in the northeast, but this is incompatible with the proclaimed desire to

reconstitute Poland, Czechoslovakia, and even Austria. A compromise peace may be more readily accepted by Germany, but not by the major democracies, which would nevertheless not be averse to accepting the “fait accompli” of Russia’s spoils from Poland, if Russia were to “give up” on Germany.

Mr. Welles has—following his pilgrimage—concluded that the time is not yet ripe for a negotiated peace.

Land military operations.

Is it foreseeable that the Franco-British forces will take the initiative in operations—that is, in an attack on the Westwall on the Western Front? As things stand, this can be ruled out. British ground forces in France are very limited; France’s demographic situation is not such as to allow for the extremely heavy losses that an attack on the Westwall would entail. As for the morale of French soldiers, it is defensive, not offensive. The Franco-British are seeking a land front less challenging than the Western Front, and Weygand’s army has been prepared for this purpose. But this famous front has not yet taken shape from a geographical standpoint. The Balkans? The Caucasus? Libya?

The Franco-British will therefore continue:

a) to refrain from taking the initiative in ground operations;

b) to operate more defensively than offensively at sea and in the air;

c) and, above all, to tighten the blockade around Germany.

German Operations.

For several months now, there has been talk of a German offensive against the Maginot Line or against Belgium and the Netherlands to reach the English Channel. Strictly speaking, this offensive also seems to be out of the question for the following reasons:

a) because Germany has already achieved its war aims and can therefore wait for the enemy to attack;

b) because it is too risky to stake everything on a single move; for if the offensive were to fail completely or end in failure with significant losses, an internal crisis in Germany would be inevitable, given that the morale of the German people is generally mediocre and, in certain major cities such as Berlin and Munich, less than mediocre. It is therefore likely that, between a war of aggression and a war of resistance, Germany would choose the latter, namely:

i) will do everything in its power to resist the blockade;

2) will take the initiative in increasingly extensive maritime and aerial counter-blockade operations. A land offensive will take place either in the event of a mathematically certain crushing victory or as a last-ditch effort if, at a certain point, the blockade leaves no other way out.

Italy’s Position.

If the most improbable of outcomes were to occur—that is, a negotiated peace in the coming months—

Italy could, despite its non-belligerent status, have a say in the matter and not be excluded from the negotiations; but if the war continues, it is absurd and impossible to believe that Italy could remain uninvolved until the end. Italy is not tucked away in a corner of Europe like Spain; it is not semi-Asian like Russia; it is not far from the theaters of operations like Japan or the United States. Italy is right in the midst of the belligerents, both on land and at sea. Even if Italy were to change its stance and throw its full weight behind the Franco-British, it would not avoid an immediate war with Germany—a war that Italy would have to wage alone; it is only the alliance with Germany—that is, with a state that does not yet need our military support and is content with our economic aid and moral solidarity—that allows us to maintain our current state of non-belligerence. Setting aside the possibility of a sudden change of allegiance—which, incidentally, the Franco-British themselves do not contemplate, thereby demonstrating their appreciation for us—there remains the other possibility: namely, waging a war parallel to Germany's to achieve our objectives, which can be summarized in this statement: freedom of the seas, a window onto the ocean. Italy will not truly be an independent nation as long as Corsica, Bizerte, and Malta remain the bars of its Mediterranean prison, and Gibraltar and Suez the walls of that same prison. Once the problem of its land borders is resolved, Italy—if it wishes to be a truly global power—must resolve the problem of its maritime borders: the very security of the Empire is tied to the solution of this problem.

Italy cannot remain neutral for the entire duration of the war without abdicating its role, without discrediting itself, without reducing itself to the level of a Switzerland multiplied by ten.

The issue, therefore, is not whether Italy will enter the war or not—because Italy will have no choice but to enter the war—but rather when and how; the goal is to delay our entry into the war as long as possible, consistent with honor and dignity:

a) so that we may prepare ourselves in such a way that our intervention determines the outcome;

b) because Italy cannot wage a long war—that is, it cannot spend hundreds of billions as the currently belligerent countries are forced to do.

But regarding the timing—that is, the date—it was clearly established at the Brenner conference that this is a matter for Italy and Italy alone.

War Plan.

Given that war is inevitable and that we cannot march alongside the Franco-British forces—that is, we cannot march against Germany—we must establish the outlines of our strategy at this very moment, so as to guide the detailed planning.

Land Front. Defensive in the Western Alps. No offensive action. Surveillance. Offensive action only in the—in my view, unlikely—event of a complete French collapse under German attack. An occupation of Corsica may be considered, but perhaps the game is not worth the candle; however, the air bases on that island must be neutralized.

In the East, toward Yugoslavia, initially, watchful observation. Offensive action in the event of an internal collapse of that state, due to the secession—already underway—of the Croats.

Albanian front: the stance toward the north (Yugoslavia) and south (Greece) depends on what happens on the eastern front.

Libya: Defensive posture toward both Tunisia and Egypt. The idea of an offensive against Egypt is to be ruled out following the formation of Weygand's Army.

Aegean: Defensive.

Ethiopia: Offensive to secure Eritrea and operations in Gedaref and Kassala; offensive in Djibouti; defensive and, if necessary, counteroffensive on the Kenyan front.

Air Force. Coordinate its operations with those of the Army and Navy: offensive or defensive operations depending on the fronts and enemy actions.

Navy. Offensive operations across the board in the Mediterranean and beyond.

It is on these directives that the General Staffs must base their studies and preparatory work without wasting a single hour, since, despite our current non-belligerence, the will of the Franco-British or an unforeseen complication could, even in the immediate future, confront us with the necessity of taking up arms.

Compared to Mussolini's position—which had been developing over the previous months and which he had outlined to Hitler at the Brenner Pass—the memorandum introduced nothing new. When Ciano received it, he described it as "a measured document"[344] and was neither surprised nor overly alarmed by it. For someone like him, who knew well what Mussolini was thinking, its content was in fact entirely predictable; nor did it worsen Italy's position, given that, in practical terms, the future remained hanging by a thread depending on how the conflict would unfold.

During the very days when the "Duce" was preparing the memorandum, Ciano, offering Bottai a sort of assessment of the situation and the Brenner meeting, had told him 345:

Nothing is definite, but we are heading toward a compromise. At the Brenner meeting, the Führer spoke for two hours and ten minutes, Mussolini for twenty minutes. Hitler, though speaking like Ribbentrop about Germany's overwhelming strength, did not give the impression of confidence that the latter displayed here in Rome. Mussolini, however, concluded by ruling out two possibilities: that Italy would side with the Franco-British; and that Italy could remain neutral for long. It is clear that only the other option remains: to march alongside the Germans. Though not explicitly stated, this is the moral of the Brenner meeting, which the Germans are drawing strength from. In my opinion, there are no guidelines to be set at this time. Events will dictate the guidelines. Either Germany attacks, breaks through, and wins—in which case it is in our interest to get involved, not least to counterbalance the victorious force—or Germany attacks and loses—in which case, even though we are already regarded as its accomplices in the eyes of the French and British, we still have time to pull out. I would be inclined to do so, given the personal relationships I maintain with the British and the French. And Mussolini knows this, because I keep him informed, even though I take full responsibility for the initiative. There is no dualism, as is being rumored.

These words aptly summarize Ciano's position and explain why the memorandum did not alarm him; however, they also clearly show how his opposition to intervening alongside Germany had by then lost any real political perspective and had transformed —if it had ever managed to be one—from an alternative to Mussolini's position, which he had aspired to represent, to nothing more than a subordinate internal reserve to that position, to be resorted to only in the event that the course of the

war had disproved Mussolini's hypothesis and necessitated a reversal of it. This was, as can be seen, far too little to make of Ciano—as some of his collaborators, misled by his confident tone and categorical statements, did 346—Mussolini's "antagonist." Although he enjoyed—especially in the early months—the support of virtually the entire ruling class, Ciano was never (and, all things considered, we do not believe he ever truly felt) in a genuinely antagonistic position toward his father-in-law; partly because he lacked the temperament and ability for it, and partly because, despite his many disagreements, he was too sincerely devoted to him. But, in his defense, it must be noted that no one else felt up to assuming the role of antagonist, not even those who were more experienced and courageous and had far fewer reasons for devotion. Not even Victor Emmanuel III, to whom that role would have rightfully and dutifully fallen, and who, instead, during these decisive months—due to weakness of character and deep-seated skepticism, to an inability and fear of conceiving any action not confined within the regime's ruling class, and to having lost much of his control over the machinery of the state 347—essentially maintained a wait-and-see stance, limiting himself to a passive role of applying the brakes—a stance that instilled confidence in many but simultaneously paralyzed any initiatives to corner Mussolini and was insufficient to prevent the disarray and defections within the anti-German front caused first by the worsening consequences of the naval blockade and the growing certainty that Mussolini had made his choice, and then by the first German successes in Scandinavia. By March, while opposition to the war and to the Germans among the masses showed no sign of abating, the unity of the anti-German faction within the ruling class and the Fascist elite had in fact begun to crack. While at the end of February Ciano, speaking with the nuncio, had only vaguely alluded to the existence of "strong currents in favor of Germany," less than a month later he painted a much more precise and concerned picture in his diary:

Mussolini—he noted on March 23[349]—who has been in good spirits and talkative these past few days, is increasingly and decisively displaying his pro-German orientation. He now speaks openly of entering the war on Germany's side... This attitude of the Duce is now influencing that of many high-ranking officials who, whether out of conformity or conviction, are aligning themselves with the interventionists: Muti, Ricci, Revel to a large extent, and Riccardi himself, who no longer dares to speak unwelcome truths as he did for so long. Grandi and Bottai remain opposed to this venture.

This situation explains not only the passage ("Mussolini has now regained strength and control over decisions") in the Vatican note of April 4 regarding the king's alleged plans to replace Mussolini with Ciano—and the abandonment of those plans precisely during this period—but also why the "Duce" felt the need to draft the "top-secret memorandum." With regard to Mussolini's operational decisions—while the question of when the intervention would take place remained entirely unresolved in the memorandum—it had significance almost exclusively in terms of the military directives it contained. We do not believe, however, that we are mistaken in stating that, in drafting it, Mussolini did not think solely of the military aspect. By putting his position in writing, he must also and above all have aimed to take advantage of the shift in attitude that was taking shape among the regime's elite and in certain sectors of the ruling class to reaffirm his authority vis-à-vis the anti-German faction and the sovereign, to test their capacity to react, and, therefore, to lay the groundwork for a possible acceleration of the timeline for intervention—which, as we have seen, the Brenner meeting had forced him to consider. In this regard, it does not seem insignificant to us that the drafting of the memorandum took place against a backdrop of minor incidents revealing a Mussolini who was increasingly irritated by those who did not share his position and more determined to silence them than in previous months, when their opposition annoyed him and even provoked outbursts of anger, but silencing them seemed less urgent to him and less counterproductive in the eyes of the Germans. And this was true whether the issue concerned the Church and Catholics or Ciano himself, regarding whom, precisely at the end of March, persistent rumors began to circulate (unfounded, since at that moment Mussolini could not—even if he

had wanted to—replace him, but significant precisely for that reason) that he was on the verge of being removed from Palazzo Chigi 350.

347 M. Taylor, upon his arrival in Rome, immediately realized that, contrary to what was believed in the U.S., the king was weak; see E. Di Nolfo, *The Vatican and the United States*, op. cit., p. 104.

349 G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 409 ff., as well as p. 403, dated March 6, 1940, which records De Vecchi's conversion to interventionism.

Whether or not he intended to test the reactions of the anti-German faction, what is certain is that these must have been almost nonexistent and such as to reinforce Mussolini's conviction that, on this front, his position—following recent events and, above all, after London's crackdown on the naval blockade and the failure of the Welles mission, on which all the hopes of the anti-German party had been pinned—had become much stronger than it had been just a few weeks earlier. We have already discussed Ciano's reaction; we know nothing specific about the reactions of the other recipients of the memorandum; yet this alone suggests that

350 See ibid., p. 413. The allusive remark regarding the downfall of the "almighty" Röhm—"the man who aspired to succeed Hitler"—must be dated to this same period; according to F. Anfuso (Da Palazzo Venezia al lago di Garda, op. cit., pp. 109 ff.), was made by Mussolini to Ciano with the clear intent of warning him not to be drawn into the machinations of his adversaries. This, on the one hand, would confirm the reliability of the Vatican note of April 4 and, on the other hand, might—if confirmed—justify linking the episode of the poison requested by Ciano from Bocchini, as reported by Leto, to the remarks about Röhm.

Either there were no such warnings, or they must have been quite generic and therefore not sufficient to arouse any real concern in him. Nor, once again, should this come as a surprise. As for the four military recipients of the memorandum, even though they were all—with the sole partial exception of Graziani—more or less opposed to intervention, their course of action was strictly conditioned by that of the sovereign; thus, in the absence of a clear stance from the king, it could only be essentially cautious; at most, it could take the form—even for them—of a more or less passive attempt to put the brakes on the situation. And not even a very explicit one at that. Badoglio's behavior is typical. In fact, on the very day he received the memorandum, the Chief of the General Staff replied to Mussolini with a letter that was little more than an acknowledgment of receipt, in which he assured him that the plans already drawn up would be revised to bring them into line with it and that on April 9 he would convene a meeting of the chiefs of staff for that purpose. And this despite the fact that just two days earlier, on April 4, he had written a letter to Mussolini in which—noting that "at present, our preparations stand at 40 percent"—he recommended "avoiding making binding commitments with the German General Staff," so as not to have "too close ties" and not to be obliged "to intervene when it suited them and not us." Nor did much more come out of the April 9 meeting (the minutes of which were forwarded to Mussolini), except for the principle, stated by Badoglio at the close, that, given the "extremely delicate" situation, it was necessary "to keep the Duce constantly and fully informed of what we have and of our actual capabilities." Quite little, in truth, given that, at the start of the meeting, Badoglio himself had said that one thing was "unequivocal": "the Duce's absolute determination to intervene in the manner and at the time of his choosing," and no one had raised any objections.[351] As for Victor Emmanuel III 352, what we know about his attitude during this period (regarding his reactions to the "top-secret memorandum" of March 31, we know only that he found it marked by a "geometric" logic 353) leads us to conclude that—once the most opportune moment to replace Mussolini had passed and

the idea of a radical solution to the situation had been abandoned—he clearly considered various courses of action (the dismissal of

352 In addition to the various references contained in G. Ciano's Diary—and especially the one on p. 418, under the date of April 11, 1940, which certainly refers to the king's first meeting with Mussolini after receiving the "top-secret memorandum"—see A. Consiglio, *Vita di Vittorio Emanuele III*, Milan 1950, pp. 209 ff.; D. Bartoli, *The End of the Monarchy*, Milan 1966, pp. 190 ff.; U. Alfassio Grimaldi and G. Bozzetti, *June 10, 1940. The Day of Madness, Bari 1974, pp. 373 ff. and 396 ff.; as well as N. D'Aroma, Twenty Years Together, op. cit., pp. 288 ff.

Mussolini, with a probable ensuing civil war and German intervention; abdication, the army's release from its oath, and exile, with the uncertain prospect of being restored to the throne by an Anglo-French victory; endorsement of Mussolini's choice, with the near certainty that, whoever the victor might have been, this would have led to the establishment of a republic[354]) without, however, being able to make a choice (which, in any case, for him had to be based on considerations of a more institutional-familial nature than national ones). The result was that, for the time being, he did essentially nothing (a fact that, even before the German successes in Norway and Denmark, had begun to erode popular support and hope around him 355) and found himself, at the decisive moment—that is, upon the collapse of France—practically unable, even if he had wanted to, to refuse to endorse Mussolini's decision to enter the war. Finally, it cannot be ruled out that the monarch's inaction was influenced by the feeling that there was still time to make a decision (at the meeting with military leaders on May 29, Mussolini—in a context stemming from the "top-secret memorandum" of March 31—reportedly stated that "initially" he had planned for intervention in the spring of 1941 356: it cannot be ruled out that this date had also

354 See U. Alfassio Grimaldi and G. Bozzetti, *June 10, 1940*, op. cit., pp. 398 ff., where a portion of a note by Victor Emmanuel III is published; this note was given to his son Umberto on the eve of Italy's entry into the war and sets forth some of the sovereign's key considerations regarding his own stance on the matter: "War is now inevitable. Mussolini has decided. No one can stop him... The king has three options... to say no to war, to depose Mussolini—who couldn't care less, will remain in his position, and will depose the king—or to appeal to the loyal army, which would lead to civil war... While the country is torn apart by fratricidal war, the German ally arrives to lend Mussolini a hand: to militarily occupy Italy. The king is captured, deported, and executed. Mussolini and Hitler continue the war together. They will lose it. The Allies will pay tribute to the king who fell in the struggle against the tyrants: the king will have his monuments in the squares and the acclaim of history. But will the deaths from the civil war provoked by the king be a fair price to pay for those monuments and that chapter of history? Second possibility: the king does not sign the declaration of war... but does not want to provoke a civil war. He abdicates and releases the army from its oath. He goes into exile. If he does not leave of his own free will, the Duce's musketeers come to evict him from the Quirinale...; the king in exile… in a pleasant place: fresh air, beautiful scenery, free time for fishing. Meanwhile, while the king fishes, Mussolini and Hitler wage war. They lose it. The Allied armies arrive in Italy as conquerors: the king follows behind, looking radiant thanks to the healthy lifestyle he has led all that time. The king is welcomed home as a triumphant hero and resumes the throne that is rightfully his: the Italians who fought Mussolini's war—because they couldn't refuse and go into exile to fish—feel guilty, defeated, and have great reverence for the king who preferred exile to waging Mussolini's war. But does the king deserve all that respect? Third possibility: Mussolini arrives with the declaration of war to ask for the king's signature. The king signs without saying a word. There are many Italians who do not want war, but they will fight it anyway—perhaps bravely, perhaps even giving their lives… The Germans might even win: in that case, Mussolini and Hitler… will seize the opportunity to kick the king to the curb—since he went to war against his will—and proclaim a republic. If, on the other hand,

as I believe, Mussolini and Hitler ultimately lose, then it's likely that the victors—and perhaps even the Italians themselves—will hold the king responsible for the war that was declared and lost, just as much as—or even more than—Mussolini: perhaps they'll send him away, along with Mussolini. A republic will be proclaimed. But will I be able to say they're wrong? I won't be able to say they're wrong. These are the three options the king has: there are no others."

(to the king), especially since, despite his interventionist intentions, Mussolini far preferred a negotiated solution to the conflict and was still working toward that end.

Upon his return from the Brenner Pass on March 19, Ciano had assured Welles that the meeting had not brought about any change in Italy's "non-belligerent" stance and had told him that if, should the opportunity arise, Roosevelt were to take a peace initiative, Italy would support it 357. Mussolini, for his part, on April 1, upon reading the minutes of the Brenner meeting that had arrived from Berlin, had once again considered for a moment writing to Hitler to try to dissuade him from going on the offensive 358. It is therefore no surprise that, when, on April 6, Ciano informed him that he had met the previous day with A. Dingli—who had come to Rome to sound out the fascist government's intentions following the Brenner meeting and was bearing a general message "of goodwill" from Chamberlain regarding a resumption of economic negotiations and a resolution to the coal issue—he immediately seized the opportunity to take a last-ditch step to persuade Loùdra to allow him to make that attempt at mediation that Hitler had refused to let him undertake.

Ciano's diary contains only a brief mention of the episode: "I briefly informed Mussolini of my conversation with Dingli. He wanted me, on his behalf, to advise him to attempt a compromise peace."[359] Much richer in detail—both regarding Mussolini's overture and how it was received and subsequently dropped in London—is the documentation preserved by Dingli. From this documentation—and in particular from the report Dingli drafted for Chamberlain upon his return from Rome[360]—it appears that when Dingli met with Ciano again on April 7, the Foreign Minister, speaking on behalf of his father-in-law, first delivered a general political address along the following lines:

He (M[ussolini]) is completely and irrevocably bound to the military alliance with Germany. This does not mean that Italy will certainly carry out a military intervention. But it does mean that, should Italy become active, there can never be any question of its supporting any party other than Germany.

Whether or not Italy intervenes militarily alongside Germany will depend on the extent to which such action serves Italian interests... If Italy does not deem it appropriate to intervene, there is no reason why relations between England and Italy should not remain "cordial" throughout this period.

He then confirmed to him that Mussolini was convinced that peace through an honorable compromise was still possible. But the time to achieve this was growing ever shorter, and it must be done before "blood begins to flow."

And, finally, he presented the "Duce's" proposal to him: "in the strictest secrecy and without in any way compromising or binding" Chamberlain, he would consider "with the utmost care" any "suggestions" that came to him through the "secret channel," transform them "into a series of proposals officially his own" to be transmitted to Berlin, and do his utmost to have Hitler accept them. For this to be possible, however, the Prime Minister's "suggestions" would have to be of a "practical nature" and address "specific issues, such as Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and all other fundamental matters." In particular, "the P[rime] M[inister] should realize that mere generalizations about a return to the status quo ante would not have provided M[ussolini] with anything to work with."

The proposal—which, on closer inspection, did not differ much from what Mussolini had already told Welles—came as a bolt from the blue in London and, moreover, after the German attack on Denmark and Norway had begun. Ball urged that it be given serious consideration; Chamberlain—apparently after some hesitation—did not, however, feel able to accept it, even after Bastianini had partially modified it, in the sense that Mussolini would have been satisfied, in order to take action, with the prime minister's agreement in principle to his idea that there could be no negotiations unless based on a willingness to negotiate without making a return to the status quo ante a precondition.[361']

Although it was never acted upon, the proposal serves to clearly illustrate Mussolini's position; it proves that even at this stage he was still considering a negotiated peace and confirms that the "top-secret memorandum" from a week earlier had been written by the "Duce" primarily to gauge the reactions of the anti-German faction—and in particular the monarch—and to cover his bases, so to speak, in the dreaded event that he might have to change his plans. "As things stood," a compromise peace was "out of the question": this did not mean that Mussolini did not believe or hope that it might still come to pass. The reference, at the end of the paragraph in the memorandum devoted to this issue, to S. Welles's opinion that the time was not "yet" ripe for a negotiated peace takes on a different significance in light of the proposal made through Dingli than it is generally given, and helps us understand how much the news of the attack on Denmark and Norway, which Hitler had conveyed to him in a letter delivered by von Mackensen on the morning of April 9—when operations had already been underway for several hours—must not only have taken Mussolini by surprise but also confronted him with a reality he had until then hoped to avoid, or at least to postpone for the time being. And this was true not only with regard to the international context—since it is clear that the German attack made a compromise peace even more unthinkable and made it more difficult for Mussolini to remain outside the conflict for long—but also with regard to the domestic situation, since the German action, its early successes, and the Anglo-French passivity, on the one hand, could not help but embolden the pro-German faction and, on the other, immediately resonated differently within the country than the invasion of Poland and the outbreak of the war had. While it is true that these events reinforced fears and hostility toward the Germans in many people, it is also true that a certain number of Italians—young people, but not only young people—on whom so many years of anti-British and anti-French propaganda had had a deeper impact, and for whom the recent events of the naval blockade had served as a sort of "calling card," were led by these events (thanks also to the new stance of the press and all the regime's mass media, which—partly by order from above and partly because they shared the same sentiment—immediately adopted an even more openly pro-German tone) to take a more or less clear stand in favor of the Germans. A note by Ciano dated April 10[362] is typical in this regard:

News of the German offensive in the North has been well received by the people, who, as Mussolini says, "are whores and go with the man who wins." More surprising than the speed of the German offensive is the lack of reaction from the French and British, who are responding to Hitler's military success with an offensive of speeches and articles that are utterly useless for the purposes of the war.

Until the morning of April 9, Mussolini had believed—or rather, had deluded himself into believing—that he could decide when to intervene and had hoped to avoid doing so altogether. The letter in which Hitler informed him of the reasons that had led him to take action in Scandinavia[3030] contained a passage, not coincidentally underlined in the text ("What I wish only is to assure you, Duce—and this is the main purpose of this hastily written letter—

363 See DDI, vol. IX, IV, pp. 10 ff. Also ibid., pp. 20 ff., 27, and 27, notes ff., a second letter from Hitler, dated April 10, written to Mussolini to inform him of the plans for the action undertaken, the

“Duce’s” reply to the two letters (dated April 11), and the text of an initial reply, drafted on the 10th and then not sent due to the arrival of Hitler’s second letter.

“that the current military operation neither affects nor detracts in any way from the explanation given to you nor from the decisions communicated to you at the Brenner”), which, combined with the rapid successes achieved by the Germans, left no room for doubt regarding at least two things: that a negotiated peace was no longer an option, and that Mussolini’s freedom of maneuver was being significantly restricted. Waiting on the sidelines, choosing the right moment to intervene, was becoming increasingly difficult: with each passing day, unless he radically changed his course of action, Mussolini’s “choices” could only be determined by Berlin’s initiatives. For Ciano, the only hope now was that the Anglo-French would in turn take the initiative and the military situation would be turned on its head.

Mackensen—he noted on April 10, 364—came to see me under a pretext. He wanted to know our further reactions to what had happened. I showered him with congratulations and praise, because there is nothing else to do at this point, even though I remain firmly of the opinion that the final word has not yet been spoken and that we may witness a reversal of the situation, perhaps even soon.

As for Mussolini, the start of the German offensive—while it had intensified his sense of humiliation at having to “sit idly by while others write history” and his irritation toward those who still refused to accept that sooner or later it would be necessary to intervene in the conflict—had not, however, led him to consider intervention in the near future. And this was despite the fact that—as his speech to the Fascist trade union leadership on April 21 at Palazzo Venezia[365] perfectly demonstrates—the latest developments in the naval blockade had provided him with the best confirmation of his conviction that Italy would never be “free” unless it had “free windows open onto the ocean.” Phrases such as the one with which Hitler had concluded one of the various letters written to him in recent weeks to “inform” him of the progress of operations (“What these operations mean for us, and especially for me, is understood throughout the world by only one man besides myself, and that man is you, Duce. You yourself once had the courage to carry out your campaign in Abyssinia under British artillery fire. My situation to date has not been very different; but I, too, have resolved not to heed so-called common sense in the most difficult hours, but instead to appeal to the strength of Honor, to the sense of Duty, and finally to my own Heart” 366) must have been like so many stabs in the back for him; nothing, however, justifies the claim that, until the great German victories in France, he did not continue to believe he still had at least another year of “non-belligerence” ahead of him, nor that he was one hundred percent certain of a final German victory, with all that this entailed for him. What should be emphasized, rather, is that the German successes in Scandinavia, combined with rumors of a possible German move to secure Romanian oil and the near-certain violation of Dutch and Belgian neutrality once Hitler went on the offensive against France—while they did not substantially alter his position—did, however, make the element of fear of the Germans increasingly important in his thinking, the fear that, to avenge his betrayal in August, to put an end to his ambiguous stance, and to secure bases and supplies of great value to them, the Germans might take action even against Italy. This was an old fear, one that had already surfaced in him between late August and the very first days of September—a fear that, as we have seen, Ambassador Loraine took for granted even before the Brenner meeting and which that meeting had intensified—but which, as various testimonies and clues now show, immediately began to take on a new significance that was destined to grow ever stronger. The reference that Mussolini had already made to Ciano on April 11 regarding the “pots cassés”—which the king claimed he was willing to go to war just to recover, but which Mussolini feared might end up being smashed over Italy’s head first[367]—makes this fear quite clear[368].

It is within this context that a whole series of events takes place—events that certainly compromised Italy's position even more significantly in the eyes of both the Germans and the Anglo-French, but which, rather than foreshadowing an imminent end to "non-belligerence," were intended to reassure and appease the Germans, silence the anti-German opposition, and prepare public opinion for an intervention that, in Mussolini's intentions, was to be delayed as long as possible and take place only when victory was certain and imminent. We recall in particular: a) the assurance that, on April 1, Mussolini rushed to give to Hitler that, starting the very next day, the fleet would be "at full war footing" and that he was "speeding up the 'timeline' for the other armed forces"; b) the increasingly pro-German stance he imposed on the press and all mass media; c) the end of the distancing and criticism of Nazi racism that had begun in the early months of "non-belligerence" 370; d) the increasingly cold and confrontational tone (combined with a much more insistent reference to the alliance binding Italy to Germany than in previous months) that he imposed on relations with Paris and London, despite the efforts of the French and British to keep them "normal" and their expressions of willingness to do everything possible to improve them; e) the replacement of Attolico as ambassador to Berlin with Alfieri—a move already planned by Mussolini due to Attolico's poor health, but carried out only after the Germans had explicitly requested it, even suggesting two names for the succession: Farinacci and, indeed, Alfieri[371]; /) the repeated references Mussolini personally made in various semi-public meetings (in particular, those on April 10 with the editors of newspapers affiliated with the Press Agency and on April 21 with union leaders 372) to the need to "gradually raise the temperature of the Italian people to create the climate necessary for the inevitable and inescapable developments that await us."

368 Given the current state of the documentation, it is impossible to determine how well-founded this fear of Mussolini was. Any conclusions that can be drawn are of only very relative value. Two observations can be made, however: despite the Brenner meeting and the increasingly pro-German stance of Italian politics after April 9, Hitler—while taking great care to keep Mussolini informed of the progress of ongoing operations—told him nothing specific about his plans of action against France; as for the supplies of raw materials and military equipment—or, in the case of the Italian war industry—that the Germans had committed to providing, their deliveries continued to be irregular and, especially in the latter case, far below expectations: even the delivery of three anti-aircraft batteries—intended for training Italian personnel who were to operate another hundred to be supplied at a later date—suffered a series of delays that could hardly be explained solely by the wartime needs of the moment.

In light of these facts, which stood in such stark contrast to the attitude of the previous months, it is easy to understand why, by the second half of April, both in Italy and abroad, people began to speak with increasing insistence of an imminent Italian intervention. And it was not just talk, but the first steps were being taken in preparation for it (by the end of the month, British merchant ships were ordered to avoid the Mediterranean route if possible) and explicit efforts were being made to persuade Mussolini to keep him out of the conflict.

The first step was taken on April 22 by the new French Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud, in a dignified yet charming and somewhat rhetorical letter, in which he reaffirmed the possibility of reaching a clarification and an agreement between the two countries and proposed, to this end, a meeting between Reynaud himself and Mussolini. Among other things, the letter stated 373:

369 Regarding the press's stance, here is what the British ambassador in Rome reported to the Foreign Office on April 15, 1940: "At the same time, the tone of the Italian press has become so hostile that it is

evident that the Italian people—who at present no longer understand anything—are being prepared for active Italian intervention, if and when Mr. Mussolini makes this decision.

“Such a decision will be made in cold blood. The Duce is convinced that he must intervene before the end of the war, since he is ‘a man too heavy to let himself fall between two chairs.’ He receives more news from the Germans than from us. He fears the Germans but believes in their strength. We have no way of reaching him, and no doubt news of our successes will be explained to him by the Germans to their own advantage. I have heard that he meets with Starace daily, and we can be certain that the former head of the Fascist Party is a regular visitor to the German Embassy” (asae, General Secretariat, p. 257).

Perhaps tomorrow the mountain folk from my hometown will fight against your people. Once the die is cast, we’ll see which forces are stronger. Perhaps then we’ll surprise one another.

But it may also be that fate has not yet been decided.

It may be that there are means other than war to reveal the true Italy to France, to reveal the true France to Italy. For the purpose of establishing the laws that will bind our children, there may be bonds other than that of blood—and just as noble.

I believe in democracy. You believe in fascism. But neither of us will deny our past, affirming through our actions that these are two glorious forms of a Mediterranean civilization that remains worthy, today as yesterday, of inspiring the future of the world. And this civilization is founded above all on our two countries.

Maintaining a European balance is a vital necessity for Italy as well as for France. Without it, neither peace nor prosperity can be lasting. What are the disagreements that may have arisen between us in recent years in the face of this fundamental fact?

It is not too late to try to bridge this wide chasm that currently seems to separate us. Your candor and mine must seek to build a bridge between a traditional system like ours and a new system like yours, each now strengthened by the disappearance of mistrust toward its neighbor.

Two days later, Pius XII took action. “As fears of a wider conflict grow,” the pontiff’s “confident spirit” could not help but reach out to the “Duce”:

“We are aware, in fact,” he wrote to him,[374] “of the noble efforts with which you sought first to prevent and then to contain the war; and though we were saddened that your efforts were not entirely successful, we were glad that you, too, were recognized for the great merit of having confined the scourge within certain boundaries.” However, now that the fire has flared up and is today more active than ever in its tragic progression, those fears are justified, while the specter of war seems to loom ever more menacingly and closely over the peoples who are still spared.

We do not doubt Your persevering efforts along the course You have set for Yourself. We implore the Lord to assist You at a time of such gravity for the peoples and of such great responsibility for those who hold the reins of government. And in the spirit of universal fatherhood that is proper to Our Office, we express from the depths of our hearts the ardent hope that, thanks to Your initiatives, Your steadfastness, and Your Italian spirit, Europe may be spared further widespread ruin and greater loss of life; and, in particular, that Our beloved country—and Yours—may be spared such a great calamity.

[beginning of note not recovered] General Piccio, the Italian air attaché in Paris, that the French government was eager to resolve the outstanding issues between the two countries as soon as possible and to establish relations with the Italian government in order to inform it of any initiatives that England and France might take in Southeast Europe in the wake of German and Soviet actions, and to discuss them with it. See ibid., pp. 161 ff. and also 168 ff.
Immediately after the start of German operations in Scandinavia, relations between the Holy See and the Italian government had cooled sharply. As early as April 10, faced with the proliferation of demonstrations and speeches in favor of peace in countless churches and the increasingly evident rift between the stance of *L'Osservatore Romano* and that of the Fascist press, Alfieri had approached Cardinal Maglione, insinuating that the "extreme pacifism" of such demonstrations and speeches—which stood in such stark contrast to the government's policy of "stirring up spirits and keeping them prepared for possible developments"—was in response to instructions from the Holy See, and urging the Vatican's official organ to "exercise restraint" and be "more impartial." See ADSS, I, pp. 420 ff.
The day after the pope's letter was sent to Mussolini, in the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, Giunta, during a fiercely anti-French and anti-British speech, accused "certain circles within Vatican City" of "antifascism as unyielding as it is powerless" and referred to the Vatican as "Italy's chronic appendicitis," eliciting applause and approval from some national councilors and a telling comment from Farinacci: "Good, good. The Church has been Italy's constant enemy." See Parliamentary Proceedings, Chamber of Deputies, Plenary Session, April 25, 1940, p. '61 (where, however, only Giunta's first statement is recorded); ADSS, I, p. 428; G. Bottai, Diario cit., ff. 832 ff., dated April 25, 1940.

The third step was taken on April 29, also at the urging of the Holy See, by Roosevelt, and focused entirely on the two arguments that the U.S. president must have considered most suitable for dissuading Mussolini: the impossibility of predicting with certainty who would win the war and the possibility that, thanks to the influence of Italy and the U.S., it might still be possible to reach a negotiated peace.

A further expansion of the theater of hostilities—Roosevelt wrote to Mussolini 375—which would draw into the war still other nations that have sought to maintain their neutrality, would necessarily have far-reaching consequences, not only in Europe but also in the Near and Far East, in Africa, and in the Americas. No one can predict with certainty today, should such a further expansion occur, what the final outcome might be—or foresee which nations, however determined they may be today to remain at peace, might nevertheless ultimately find it imperative for their own defense to enter the war.

I am, as you know, a realist. As inevitably happens in every conflict, the participants themselves are far less capable of predicting the outcome of the struggle than the closest observers, and the latter may not be as well-positioned to determine which side will prevail as those observers who are even further removed. Thanks to its geographical position, this country

Just how convinced people in the United States were that Mussolini's stance was determined and could be determined solely by the desire to play it safe and secure the greatest possible advantages is demonstrated by an article, "The Fascist No. 1," which appeared on April 8, 1940, in *Time*. In it, following a detailed account of the reasons that had led Mussolini to proclaim "non-belligerence," we read: "Italy's future stance, as of last week, was still as obscure as the Duce's skill could make it. But from the uncertainty emerged some strong possibilities:

1) Italy would not enter the war on the side of the Allies. Its experience during and after the last war—

fought with almost no benefit to itself—was still too fresh a memory. Furthermore, Italy would have nothing to gain from Germany. Should an Allied victory appear likely, Italy would remain outside the conflict until its end and would then leverage the combat effectiveness of an intact army to bring about a general redistribution of the spoils at the Peace Conference.

2) It would not be possible to impose on the Italians—as had already happened with the Germans—close cooperation with Russia. If there is any tripartite cooperation at all, it will likely be of an economic nature only.

3) Should Germany achieve military success, Italy might enter the war, but only once the outcome is clear and the final battle is nearly halfway through. In the latter case, Italy has much more to gain by defeating the Allies alongside Germany than by witnessing the Allies' victory. The benefit it would derive from its intervention would presumably be a substantial portion of the French colonial empire and, furthermore, a share in the control of Central Europe.

"Despite the Duce's remarkable political maneuvers over the past six months, future events in Italy may not align with his personal desires. The reason for this is that he still wishes to fight—today, tomorrow, and at any time—while his fellow citizens, who are not warriors and have not been so since the time of Charlemagne, wish to remain outside the conflict."

I have a broad view of the current hostilities in Europe. Because of the many unforeseeable factors involved, I see no reason to anticipate that any single nation—or any combination of nations—will be able to successfully set out to dominate either the European continent or, even less so, a larger part of the world.

I sincerely believe that the powerful influence of Italy and the United States—an influence that is very strong as long as they remain at peace—can still be exerted, when the right opportunity arises, in favor of negotiations for a just and stable peace that will allow for the reconstruction of a severely afflicted world.

Mussolini reserved his sharpest response for Reynaud: a few lines refusing to meet with him and a brief reference to the alliance binding Italy to Germany, a treaty "which Italy—like all nations that value their honor—intends to respect" 376. Even his reply to the Pope 377, however, was not without a polemical tone:

The history of the Church—and you yourself have taught me this, Most Blessed Father—has never accepted the formula of peace for peace's sake, of peace "at any cost," of "peace without justice"—that is, a "peace" which, under certain circumstances, could irreparably compromise the fate of the Italian people, both now and in the future.

The most well-argued, but also the most absurd ("I would point out that Italy has never interfered in the relations of the American Republics among themselves or between them and the United States—thus respecting the Monroe Doctrine—and could therefore demand 'reciprocity' with regard to European affairs") was the one addressed to Roosevelt 378; it is worth noting, however, that while in this letter—as in the one to Pius XII—Mussolini strove to shift the responsibility for any potential Italian intervention onto the Anglo-French powers and, to this end, made explicit reference to the "continuous, vexatious, and harmful" control to which Italian merchant traffic was subjected, the possibility of Italy's participation in the conflict was hinted at in slightly more nuanced terms. While the "Duce" wrote to the Pope that, although he understood his desire "that Italy be allowed to avoid war," he could

not “in any way guarantee that this could last until the end,” in the closing of his reply to Roosevelt one seems almost to detect a desire to keep a glimmer of hope open for the possibility of negotiations:

Should conditions permit it, and always proceeding from the recognition of actual and established facts, Italy is ready to make its contribution toward a better world order.

Beyond their content, however, what makes these replies most significant is the fact that Mussolini had them forwarded immediately to Hitler as well;379 evidently to demonstrate his good faith and avert the danger that Berlin might suspect him of playing a double game.

Even within the regime, there were certainly those who, more often verbally but also in writing, sought to influence Mussolini and dissuade him from entering the war. Based on the available documentation, however, we know of only one formal communication—that is, one that explicitly addressed the issue. As for the others, what we know leads us to believe that these were mostly indirect efforts, almost always in the form of clarifications and complaints regarding the unpreparedness of the economy and, above all, the armed forces to sustain a conflict. This explains why such interventions came primarily from those with the greatest expertise and authority on the matter—namely, military officers, including those without direct command responsibilities (such as De Bono and Caviglia) or those who held both political and military roles (such as Balbo, who was among those who most frequently and explicitly warned Mussolini)—though there were also interventions by purely political figures. Among these, we note that of Carlo Ravasio, which is, moreover, typical of how such arguments were generally presented. The letter that the editor-in-chief of *Gerarchia* wrote to Mussolini on April 10, No. 380, did not address the subject directly. His argument centered entirely on “a doubt that has tormented me for a long time and prompts me to write to you,” namely, the doubt regarding “our military preparedness”:

I do not know what the General Staff reports to you; I do not know if we have special weapons in reserve, as yet unknown to anyone. I have no knowledge of this, but I would like it to be so. Because with the weapons currently in the public domain—both in terms of their quality and their quantity—despite the magnificent human resources at the Armed Forces’ disposal, we must not consider ourselves prepared for every possible war on the continent and against continental nations... Duce, I have no reason to deceive you. The reports I have sent you on the state of our aeronautical preparedness and the related industry are not the product of a pessimistic mindset; if you wish, I will conduct

The reference to “special weapons” is likely to the so-called “death ray,” which, according to legend, had been invented by G. Marconi and could stop engines from a distance. Experiments along these lines had indeed been conducted by the scientist toward the end of his life, but the invention had never been fully realized. Mussolini had made some very vague references to it, and there had been talk of the “success” of certain experiments conducted on roads near Rome. In the oft-cited “soliloquy” with I. Fossani in 1945, Mussolini is said to have dwelled at length on the matter, stating that Marconi had in fact perfected his invention but, after seeking the Pope’s advice, had decided not to reveal it; Mussolini had tried to change his mind, but the scientist had died before he could succeed. For the entire account, which clearly serves a self-defensive purpose, see Mussolini, XXXII, pp. 175 ff., as well as, regarding the “death ray,” G. Masini, Guglielmo Marconi, Turin 1975, pp. 418 ff.

I am conducting the investigation. I strongly fear that there are people, whether in good or bad faith, determined not to tell you the truth. They desire your praise—which they know is highly coveted—and, to obtain it, they fabricate stories. Needless to say, such people, at heart, betray you and the nation...

From this premise sprang the conclusion, clear in substance but significantly presented in a tortuously indirect form:

Duce, I believe that you will prolong this “non-belligerence” for a long time, which may one day bring all the peoples of the world before the Court of Rome; but for this very reason, too, we must be armed —armed to the teeth.

Please forgive and understand my concern, which I have expressed to you with the frankness of a fascist who has never asked anything of you and never will.

Nor, as usual, should this behavior on the part of the majority come as too much of a surprise. In a reality such as that of Fascist Italy at the time—where everything, and in particular everyone’s political fortunes, depended on the will of the “Duce,” where very few had even the slightest insight into his intentions, and where everyone had lost hope not only of influencing his decisions but even of discerning, in his behavior and words, what was pretense and maneuvering and what, on the other hand, constituted his true intentions— so that every one of his acts or statements was subject to conflicting interpretations and assessments, very few—indeed, almost none—had the courage to offer him advice they knew or feared would be unwelcome, while all—or nearly all—those who might have dared to take such an initiative were convinced that if anyone could stop Mussolini, it was only the sovereign, and that, in any case, the danger was not immediate. This was all the more true because Mussolini used to reply to those who expressed concerns to him that they were unjustified, since he had no intention of entering the war for the time being and that it was primarily a matter of “keeping the Germans at bay.” The only one to take an explicit step was Grandi, with a long and highly skillful letter written on April 21, in which his effort to frame the discussion in terms best suited to Mussolini’s sensibilities and psychology is evident. In it, 382 Grandi no longer attacked, as he had in September, the alliance with Germany, and, in a certain sense, did not even dispute Mussolini’s conviction that Italy had no choice but to enter the war; rather, he warned him against rushing things without waiting for the political framework of the conflict—which was still far from

381 A typical example is what G. Bottai (Diario, op. cit., ff. 830 ff.) noted on April 21, 1940, regarding Mussolini’s speech that same day to union leaders: “Contradictory echoes… Some of the listeners gained the impression of an inner balance; others, of an unstoppable impetus. Perhaps it all boils down to that Aesopian image Mussolini used to describe himself to one of his interlocutors: ‘Have you ever watched a cat as it studies its prey and then pounces on it? Watch it. I intend to act in the same way.’”

It was clear that the situation had been fully defined, and in particular, that the USSR’s stance had been defined (with great political acumen, Grandi—based on intelligence long in the possession of Palazzo Chigi—took, among other things, the Soviet occupation of Bessarabia for granted), the true great unknown of the war—one that could alter its course and nature, and with them its political and historical significance for Italy. Here is how Grandi, in the central part of the letter, developed his argument:

Until recently, it was legitimate to hope for a resolution of the conflict. Germany’s sudden attack on Denmark and Norway, carried out in recent weeks, has created a “new situation.” The Western Front is shifting. War is now, it seems, truly beginning at sea. Should we consider ourselves on the eve of major and decisive events? I do not know.

On September 1, Italy declared its abstention from the war alongside Germany. The Italian-German Alliance Treaty of May 22, 1939, did not take effect. In the seven months that followed, relations

between Italy and Germany were cordial but rather cool. Italy's relations with France and England were normal and cordial. We have, in fact, assisted these two nations. As far as I am concerned—and this is a very small part of the matter—you yourself authorized me to supply the French government, for the French army, with a considerable quantity of shoes and leather goods manufactured in our penal institutions, which are under the jurisdiction of the judicial administration.

For the past month—and this cannot be denied—our relations with France and England have suddenly deteriorated. Negotiations between Rome and London regarding coal supplies have effectively been suspended. The British Admiralty has detained several Italian steamships at sea. The Italian press has suddenly resumed speaking of Italian-German solidarity. Unease is growing not only in Europe but also within Italy.

I take the liberty of submitting my impressions to you, for whatever you may make of them.

This war has three major protagonists: Germany, England, and Russia. The position of France (and also that of Italy) is complementary.

For now, the war is being waged between two nations of Germanic origin: the German nation (the "Saxons of the land") and the British nation (the "Saxons of the sea"). The duel has not yet become a deadly one, but it may well turn into one.

Who will be the arbiter who decides the outcome of this deadly duel?

Russia.

Russia's position is unclear. For now, Russia has sought to gain the maximum advantage by making Germany pay a heavy price: Poland, the Baltic States, and Romania. The Slavs are resuming their march toward the West. Peter the Great's testament, which pointed to the West and the warm southern seas as the direction for the future expansion of the Slavic peoples, has been taken up by Stalin, the new "Little Father" of all Russias.

I have told you many times about the real chill I felt while reading passages from the "Memoirs" of the former French Ambassador to the Court of St. Petersburg (Paleologue) and the former British Ambassador (Lord Buchanan). It was April 1915; the European war had been raging for eight months, just as this second European war has been raging for eight months. Italy, already an ally of Germany and Austria, was preparing to enter the war alongside France and England, and for this reason the Treaty of London had been signed, granting Italy possession of the Dalmatian coast. In response to the appeals made by the French and British ambassadors at the court in St. Petersburg urging Russia to ratify the London Pact, the Tsar initially offered a vehement refusal, having his Foreign Minister Sazanoff reply in the following terms: "Dalmatia to Italy? Never. You forget that among the patron saints of Holy Russia is St. George the 'Dalmatian.'"

Russia has yet to give its final word. What will it be? I do not know. Which side will Russia take? It is not yet possible to say. For now, it "stands" with the Germans. But will this be its "permanent" position?

It is possible that Russia will intervene in the future with all the weight represented by its inexhaustible human potential and its vast territory: the two eternal factors in all Russian wars. Will it intervene at the last moment alongside the victor to divide the spoils, or against the likely victor to limit the extent of its

victory? It is impossible to say today. But Russia will intervene.

And Italy?

It seems to me that if there is ever a time when our abstention from the war proves to be a wise decision and in line with our vital interests, this is precisely that moment. Even more so than it was on September 1, 1939.

If the war is short (a “German” war) and leads to some sort of provisional settlement (in which case it would be the “second” armistice after that of 1918), then Italy’s obvious interest is to stay out of it until the very end. Alternatively, the war will be long (“British” war), and in that case, all the more so, Italy’s obvious interest is to preserve its freedom of action until the very end, in view of the “imponderables” inherent in all long wars. Whatever position Russia ultimately takes will be the new and decisive “factor” that will allow Italy to determine the course to follow.

You know, Duce, that I love the study of history. There was a moment in the history of ancient Rome (when the barbarians were already running rampant within the provinces of the Empire and within Italy itself) when a great Roman general, Aetius, managed to save the Empire by intervening at the last hour in a war that was effectively being fought between the Roman West and the Asian East represented by Attila, but in which, nevertheless, two groups of Germanic nations were pitted against each other: on one side, the Visigoths of France, who were defending the West; on the other, the Saxon nations beyond the Elbe, allies of Attila, who were attacking the West. Mid-6th century.

Aetius and Rome allied with the Visigoths of France, and the Roman West and Europe were saved.

It may be that history will repeat itself in the future, if Italy knows how to wait for its moment without rushing. It is never “too late” for a nation to enter a war. Italy is not a power on par with any of the other key players in the current European drama, but it “can” nevertheless—under certain conditions—serve as the “decisive factor” in resolving the crisis within the framework of its own national interests and those of Europe. These conditions depend on what Russia—the third major player, still absent—will or will not do. Italy’s future position can be judiciously assessed based on the definitive stance Russia will ultimately adopt.

Only then will we see.

But until then, we remain as we are: neutral, non-belligerent, abstaining. The wording doesn’t matter, as long as Italy stays out of it.

In the meantime, however, let us prepare and arm ourselves in earnest.

The letter received no reply. Ciano’s diary makes no mention of it, and Mussolini did not discuss it in his *Storia di un anno*, where it could hardly have been presented as “evidence” against Grandi. It is therefore impossible to say what reaction it provoked in him. It is possible, however, that its effect was less than what Grandi must have expected. As long as they remained secret and as long as he had not decided to take a stand, positions such as Grandi’s might have irritated him, appearing to him as “undue interference,” but they did not truly concern him. We believe confirmation of this can be found in an episode that occurred a few days later, preserved in Grandi’s own memoirs, and which, moreover, is quite useful for understanding the atmosphere of those days and the uncertainty regarding Mussolini’s true intentions—an uncertainty that must have plagued even those who knew him best. Grandi writes

on page 383:

On April 27, the regular session of Parliament for the annual review of the national budget came to a close. It was customary on such occasions for the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies to deliver a brief speech of greeting and good wishes to the Head of Government. I wrote it, in fact, and sent it, as was the custom, to P. Venezia so that the Head of Government could review it in advance in case he wished to respond. A few hours later, the text was returned to me completely revised, with phrases that did not satisfy me. I then went to P. Venezia and explained to Mussolini why I did not consider the speech, as he had revised it, to be appropriate. One phrase in particular struck me: “Italy knows it is not outside or on the sidelines of the current conflict...” Mussolini expressed his thoughts to me in a calm and convincing tone: “It is absolutely essential, at this undoubtedly delicate moment, not to arouse the Germans’ suspicion. We do not know what they will actually do. I have no intention of entering the war. But I want to lull the Germans into a false sense of security. On the other hand, it seems that Paris, London, and above all Washington are finally deciding to make us serious offers. These offers will become even more serious in the near future. The time will come when our neutrality will be paid for at a high price—all the higher the more they become convinced that Italy is not determined to stand on the sidelines, no matter what happens.” Mussolini’s words and the tone in which he uttered them gave the impression that he truly meant them. Even today, I believe that even at that moment—April 27—he was not seriously considering war.

In this context, already so confused and deteriorated, at five o’clock in the morning on May 10, the news of the start of the German attack on France struck Mussolini—completely out of the blue.

383 D. Grandi, Memorie, op. cit.; Grandi (ibid.) also reports that at the end of April, when Balbo—who had come from Tripoli to request the dispatch of artillery and fortification materials to Libya—was refused by Mussolini, the latter reportedly said: “There will be no war. Think of your settlers, your wells, and your olive trees.”

Grandi’s speech was published (in addition to the Parliamentary Proceedings, Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, 30th Legislature, Plenary Session of April 27, 1940, pp. 612 ff.) in all newspapers and “posted,” by decision of the Chamber. The subsequent stages of its drafting—but not Mussolini’s remarks—are documented in the D. Grandi Archive, b. 124, phase 169, sub. 6.

Chapter Seven

The Speech

The last letter Hitler wrote to Mussolini on May 3 to update him on developments in the operations in Norway contained nothing that might suggest an imminent action in the West. When, at 5:00 a.m. on May 10, von Mackensen went to Villa Torlonia to deliver a new letter from the Führer and a large bundle of documents, the “Duce” expected anything but the announcement that the offensive had begun. Evidently, Hitler—having learned from what had happened months earlier, when the Italians had tipped off the Belgians that the invasion of their country was part of German plans—had wanted to maintain the strictest secrecy until the very last moment. Hence the need to justify himself in some way to the “Duce,” claiming that he had made his decision only after “in recent days there has been an increase in reports indicating that England —having learned from its experiences in Norway—was now determined to suddenly occupy a number of militarily important strongpoints in the Netherlands,” and on the basis of the “threatening events of the very last few days” to which, in fact, the documents contained in the large package that von Mackensen was charged with delivering to Mussolini along

with the letter referred.

Since—judging by the state of affairs—we have found ourselves since yesterday—he wrote in his letter dated May 9, 1914—under the threat of imminent danger, I have therefore decided today to order an attack on the western front tomorrow morning at 5:35 a.m., and to first ensure, by military means, the neutrality of Belgium and the Netherlands.

This "communication" was followed first by a general appeal to Mussolini to "understand the force of circumstances that compel me to act," then two brief sentences, far from clear, since they could be interpreted either as an expression of full, confident respect for the "Duce's" sense of responsibility and wisdom, or as an explicit and threatening call to put an end to the delays and intervene as soon as possible:

I hope that I will soon be able to create the situation I mentioned during our last meeting.

I will keep you informed of the action, and you will thus be able to consider and make, in complete freedom, the decisions for which you believe you should assume responsibility in the interest of your people.

In his diary (where he also states that he immediately told his father-in-law that "for now, it is best to wait and see: it is a long game, so long that it is impossible to conceive of it at this moment"), Ciano shows that he understood it as "a polite invitation." We do not know how Mussolini interpreted it. Certainly, the news of the start of the offensive could not have pleased him in the least, even though he told von Mackensen that he "fully approved of Hitler's action"[2] and immediately sent a reply to Berlin that was so elaborate[3]:

I thank you for the message you sent me at the very moment your troops were receiving the order to march westward. As with the campaign in Norway, the press and the Party's actions will guide the Italian people's sentiment toward an understanding of the necessity in which you found yourself. I feel that time is of the essence for Italy as well, and I am deeply grateful for your promise to keep me informed of developments so that I may make my own decisions. As for Italian military forces, the Navy is ready, and by May two army groups will be ready in the west and east, as will the air force and anti-aircraft units. Needless to say, I am following the actions of your troops with confidence and a spirit of camaraderie.

Although extremely vague ("warm but non-committal," as Ciano4 described it), it was nonetheless a further step toward commitment. And others followed in the days that followed. On the 14th, Ciano, whose attitude was beginning to shift5, told von Mackensen that the moment of intervention was approaching ("it is no longer a matter of months: it is a matter of weeks and perhaps days"), and to the U.S. ambassador that while the probability of intervention had been fifty percent just a week earlier, it had now risen to ninety percent[6]; and on the 19th, Mussolini, in a second message to Hitler in response to the letters Hitler continued to send him to keep him informed of the progress of operations, expressed himself in these terms[7]:

6 G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 430, where the statement is attributed to Mussolini, but the attribution is unconvincing, given that von Mackensen, in his report on the meeting (DGFP, s. D, IX, pp. 338 ff.) reports a very similar statement by Ciano but makes no mention of such far-reaching assertions by the "Duce" which, had they been made, he would certainly not have failed to communicate to Berlin. See also, in this regard, G. L. André, *La guerra in Europa*, op. cit., p. 389 and note; W. Phillips, *Ventures

in Diplomacy*, op. cit., pp. 271 ff. (the date is taken from C. Hull, *Memorie di pace e di guerra*, Milan-Rome 1949, I, p. 303).

I thank you for having found the time, during a lull in the formidable victorious battle, to send me a report on the progress of operations. I repeat that these operations are being followed not only with interest but with enthusiasm by the Italian people, who are now convinced that the period of non-belligerence cannot last much longer. In this regard, I intend to provide you with important news in the coming days. I believe your Foreign Minister has already informed you of the messages recently sent to me by Roosevelt and Churchill and of my replies, but all of this is now of very limited importance. I send you my warmest comradely regards.

Perhaps this was why, in the three letters he sent to Mussolini in the following weeks (on May 13, 18, and 25[8]), Hitler did not return to the subject of Italian intervention, limiting himself instead to paving the way for it with an increasingly triumphant account of his troops' successes and a growing display of his confidence in a swift and decisive victory. Already in the letter of May 18, his statements on the matter were drastic: "The miracle of the Marne in 1914 will never be repeated!" A week later, his confidence in victory was accompanied by an assessment of the situation that would have made it seem justified not only to Mussolini but to anyone:

This success has fully vindicated all the measures that had been taken against us. For the moment, the southern front is firmly secured, while to the north we are already advancing decisively toward Calais. As of this morning, all the armies are resuming their attack against an enemy that is already showing signs of weakened resistance. In the area that is shrinking ever further, there are:

1) 20 Belgian divisions—or rather, what remains of them;

2) 13–14 British divisions—that is, what remains of them;

3) at least 28 French front-line divisions and another 10 or perhaps more reserve divisions.

It is therefore estimated that the combined Dutch-Belgian-French-British forces have lost approximately 60% of their total strength in just a few days.

Of the British troops, only two divisions are likely to remain on the continent at this point, in addition to some very poorly trained reserves located south of our defensive line. Of the French, there should be at most 60 divisions, though a large portion of them have already been severely tested. Against these 60 divisions in total that France and England still have at their disposal—a portion of which are tied down along the old frontier (the Maginot Line) and in the Alps—a German attack front comprising approximately 165 divisions will soon be deployed.

Air superiority is fully assured with regard to the French air force. As for the British air force, our superiority has been sufficiently established to guarantee the defense of the continent against British air attacks at all times.

Although Hitler no longer mentioned the issue of intervention in his letters, in Berlin—despite the repeated "assurances" from Mussolini, Ciano, and Alfieri—and although, at that moment, it was of little military interest to the Germans, so that, in theory, they would even have been willing to give the Italians more time to prepare—was still not considered a certainty, and the doubts and concerns

regarding the Italian stance did not diminish. An echo of these concerns can be detected in what Göring said on May 22 to Alfieri, who had gone to see him to present him with the insignia of the Annunziata. The marshal first outlined the military situation and its upcoming developments, up to the point where "having taken control of the entire coast and occupied Paris, Germany's turn will come to face England"; then he posed to Alfieri, in a direct and explicit manner, the question closest to his heart: on what date would Italy enter the war? And when Alfieri said he did not know and that "such a decision will be communicated by the Duce when he deems it appropriate or necessary to make it," he was "somewhat taken aback," so much so that in his report the Italian ambassador observed:

Evidently, he was aware of the Duce's message announcing the imminence of important events. I then added that the date clearly could not be very far off, not least because public opinion in Italy had now reached a fever pitch; and the Duce has a habit of moving quickly.

At that, Göring immediately said that, in his opinion, the "ideal moment" would be "immediately following the capitulation of the Franco-British forces—which are already cut off—and the siege of Paris," so as to bring about France's capitulation and, perhaps, an internal revolution. After that, when Alfieri asked him whether he considered U.S. intervention possible, he hastened to reassure him in the strongest terms:

that is of no particular importance. In order for America to exert direct influence in Europe, it needs a bridgehead, which, in this case, would be France. With France out of the way, it is hard to see where and how America could land its troops and equipment. Nor should we overlook the fact that the French ports on the Atlantic are now within the range of German bombers.

And, immediately afterward, evidently alarmed by Alfieri's question, he showed "an unexpected and unsuspected interest" in relations between Italy and the Church, which clearly demonstrates how the Germans feared that Mussolini might be prevented from entering the war by Catholic opposition and by the fear "that the Pope, coinciding with Italy's entry into the war, might adopt such an adversarial stance as to lead him to issue a sort of excommunication against the Duce for having irrevocably bound himself, through acts of war, to a nation where anti-Catholic propaganda is officially promoted." '.?

But let's return to Rome. The news of the German offensive—which left Italians holding their breath, all more or less aware that the fate of Europe, and of Italy first and foremost, depended on it—was not only a surprise to Mussolini but also the trigger that brought to a head a series of conflicting reactions within him that —with the ups and downs typical of his character—continued for a couple of weeks to overlap and take their toll on him, rendering him incapable of making a decision he felt he had to make and wanted to make, but from which, all things considered, he sought to escape, hoping that some new development would allow him to avoid making it, to postpone it, and—at least at first—to still have time to make it. Even if he had been mistaken in his assessment of the strength of the French army and its capacity for resistance, hadn't it been Hitler and von Ribbentrop themselves (and before the Norwegian campaign) who had said that it would take several months to subdue France, and who had spoken of victory "before the end of the year" (Hitler) or "before autumn" (the ever-optimistic von Ribbentrop)? It was May; there was therefore still time to decide...

A careful reading of the available sources allows us to summarize his most characteristic reactions as follows: a) a desire to participate in the conflict, which he now viewed as decisive for Europe and for Italy;10 b) skepticism regarding the Germans' chances of achieving a decisive victory; c) the conviction that if the United States "was determined to help the democracies, it would do so now, to prevent their defeat on the continent and the neutralization of France"; d) a willingness to intervene

only if he were certain of a swift final victory; e) fear that a delay in intervening would render his contribution to victory irrelevant, further diminish his influence at the peace table, and—if postponed too long—even irritate the Germans to the point of making him pay the price

10 See O. Dinale, *Forty Years of Conversations with Him*, op. cit., p. 167: “A fascist war,” they whisper in the slums of our own country, and the echo of the London radio is heard once more. What a fascist in Egypt! My war—the fascist war of the people—was concluded in Addis Ababa.

“This is the quintessential Italian war, which was supposed to restore our sea and our lands to us, which was supposed to open the doors of the vast African expanse to the labor and genius of the Italians. It is, alas, Europe’s holy war for true freedom and independence against the centuries-old game of the British pound, the five meals a day, British Puritanism, the English Bible, the ivory cane with its golden knob, and the regal, imperial British snobbery.”

of his “betrayal” the previous year and his subsequent ambiguities and evasions; two of his remarks are symptomatic of the latter: one, made to O. Sebastiani in May, commenting on the messages sent by Pius XII to the monarchs of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg—all of which had been invaded by the Germans— “If we continue with the neutrality that many would like, we too would receive a fine telegram of indignation from the Pope to wave in the face of the German occupiers”; and another, with O. Dinale a few days later: “Let’s assume, for the sake of argument, the damned hypothesis that the situation were to be turned on its head by American intervention. Do you think that, in such an event, the frenzied Hitler would tolerate [sic] our neutrality for even a minute? He would invade us within twenty-four hours and reach Cape Melibeo in three days. And certainly with a far more ruthless ferocity than that with which he overran Poland” 11. Nor, finally, should we underestimate the irritation aroused in him by the opposition to intervention—which he knew was still widespread—and which merged within him with an ever-growing desire to silence that opposition, thereby reaffirming his power and preventing a recurrence of the situation of isolation and weakness in which he had found himself in August and September.

Ciano’s diary contains various entries that clearly confirm this complex state of mind and its contradictions. It records, from the moment Hitler’s first letter arrived, Mussolini’s keen desire to intervene (albeit at first with some half-heartedness, later abandoned, for an independent and, all things considered, anti-German action against Yugoslavia rather than an intervention against the Anglo-French[12]) and the outright outbursts that led him to note to his son-in-law that nothing, except “a new turn of military events,” could now hold him back, as in this entry from May 13[13]:

A few months ago, I said that the Allies had lost the victory; today I tell you that they have lost the war. We Italians are already disgraced enough. Any delay is inconceivable: we have no more time to lose. Within the month, I will declare war. I will attack France and England in the air and at sea. I no longer think of the action against Yugoslavia: it would be a humiliating fallback.

But note also that these outbursts were not followed by any concrete action. Four days after the entry just cited, for example, we read[14]:

Reports from the French front indicate a sweeping German advance. Saint-Quentin has been taken, and from there Paris is directly threatened... Mussolini is calm, and, at least so far, shows no sign of wanting to hasten the timing of the intervention.

And again on May 20, Ciano noted: “Today he is not talking about intervention.”[15] From an entry the

following day, it is clear that Mussolini was not considering intervention in the very near future, since Ciano, speaking to him about the need to clarify in advance with the Germans “how much, once the matter is settled, will come to us,” he could tell him—without Mussolini objecting in the least—that he planned to meet with von Ribbentrop for this purpose “after June 1”[16] and could then leave for four days to visit his beloved Albania. Nor does the picture change if one looks beyond Ciano’s notes.

' With the start of the French campaign, efforts to dissuade Mussolini from siding with Germany had resumed: in the new military situation that was taking shape—however unprepared Italy might be—its contribution could have been decisive in defeating France and could have created major difficulties for England as well; it was no coincidence that Churchill, in his first letter to Roosevelt following Italy’s intervention, noted that “the Italian outrage compels us to face a far greater number of submarines, which can venture as far as the Atlantic and may have bases in Spanish ports” 17. On May 14, Roosevelt—following a “frantic” French request[18]—sent Mussolini a new personal message in a tone significantly more conciliatory than that used the previous month[19]:

I do not know, Your Excellency, what your plans or intentions may be, but the reports reaching me from various sources, according to which you are reportedly contemplating an imminent entry into the war, are a cause of grave concern to me. Forces of destruction, forces that deny God, forces that seek to dominate humanity through terror rather than reason—it seems that at this very moment they are extending their conquest against one hundred million human beings whose sole desire is peace. You, whom the great Italian people call their Leader, hold in your hands the power to halt the spread of this war to another group of two hundred million souls in the Mediterranean region.

I have informed you, Your Excellency, on another occasion, that I am a realist. As a realist yourself, I know you will acknowledge that if this war were to spread throughout the world, it could no longer be controlled by heads of state and would bring with it the destruction of millions of lives and the very best of what we call freedom and the culture of civilization. And no man, however omniscient or powerful, can foresee the consequences, either for himself or for his people.

Almost at the same time, however, the American ambassador to France, Bullitt, in a conversation with the nuncio, Monsignor Valeri, suggested to him that, in order to restrain Mussolini, the pope should threaten him with excommunication. See ADSS, I, pp. 458 ff. Cardinal Suhard, at Reynaud’s request, was also moving in the same direction. See ibid., pp. 460 ff. and 464.

I therefore make a simple appeal to you, as the leader of Italy, to hold back and remain completely uninvolved in any war, and to refrain from any threat of attack. Only in this way can you help humanity tonight, tomorrow, and in the pages of history.

Even more significant, however, is that two days later Churchill—who had just taken over as head of the British government, replacing Chamberlain—also wrote to him. Of all the steps taken between April and June regarding Mussolini, this was certainly the most firm and dignified; a warning and nothing more: England would not desist from the struggle, whatever the outcome of the battle underway on the continent. A warning that clearly explains the uncompromising stance London would adopt a few days later in response to the intentions of Paris (and Washington) to try to hold Mussolini back at the last minute by offering him tangible colonial concessions, but which is of particular interest to us for another reason: the day before writing to the “Duce,” the prime minister, in a letter to Roosevelt,[20] had said that he did indeed expect Mussolini to “rush to take part in the plundering of civilization,” but had added that he was not yet certain of this; which, on the one hand, explains why even a man like Churchill felt compelled to write to Mussolini at that moment and, on the other hand,

makes it clear that, despite everything, even London in mid-May was not one hundred percent certain that Mussolini had completely burned his bridges. Here is the text of the letter sent to him by Churchill[21]:

Now that I have assumed the office of Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, my thoughts return to our meetings in Rome, and I feel the desire to offer words of goodwill

This letter, together with Mussolini's two letters to Churchill dated May 18, 1940, and April 24, 1945, constitutes one of the pieces of evidence cited by those who, on several occasions, have argued for the existence of a "Churchill-Mussolini correspondence" from the war years, which has mysteriously been lost (perhaps recovered by Churchill himself in the immediate postwar period) or has not yet been found. An authoritative and very well-informed author such as H. McGaw Smyth, in *Secrets of the Fascist Era* (London-Amsterdam, 1973, pp. 214 ff.), has not entirely ruled out the possibility that the correspondence existed. We will address this issue in the next volume. As for the part of the alleged correspondence that pertains to the period we are discussing here, suffice it to say that there are two versions of it. According to one version, Churchill—faced with the looming French defeat and the possibility that England, too, might be forced to come to terms with Germany—allegedly even asked Mussolini to enter the war, so that at the peace table, facing the British and French, there would be not only Hitler but also the only person capable of restraining him. In our view, this version is entirely unreliable: testimonies such as that of A. Targhi, *Teste dure* (Milan, 1967), p. 170, are certainly not sufficient to support it. According to another, more credible account, between December 1939 and February 1940, Churchill reportedly wrote at least four letters to Mussolini to inform him that the British navy would adopt a lenient stance in enforcing the blockade against Italian ships and to cautiously assure him of Britain's willingness to consider, at the appropriate time, some of Italy's claims, all in exchange for Italy's maintenance of strict neutrality. See, in this regard, F. Bandini, *The Secret Life and Death of Mussolini*, Milan 1978, pp. 98 ff.

I wish to convey to you, as Head of the Italian Nation, my concern regarding what appears to be a rapidly widening chasm. Is it too late to prevent a river of blood from flowing between the British and Italian peoples? There is no doubt that we can both inflict serious damage upon one another, slaughter each other mercilessly, and darken the Mediterranean with our struggle. If you so decide, then so be it; but I declare that I have never been an enemy of the Italian people, nor have I ever, in my heart, been an adversary of the one who makes the laws for Italy. It would be out of place to make predictions about the course of the great battles now raging in Europe, but I am certain that whatever may happen on the continent, England will persevere to the end—even if completely alone, as we have done on other occasions—and I believe, with good reason, that we will receive increasing support from the United States of America and, indeed, from all of the Americas.

Please believe that it is without any spirit of weakness or fear that I address this solemn appeal to you, one that will be remembered. Through the ages, above all other calls, the cry reaches us that the common heirs of Latin and Christian civilization must not face one another in a deadly struggle. Hear it, I implore you with all honor and respect, before the dreadful signal is given.

It will never be given by us.

Mussolini's replies to both messages[22] confirmed that Italy intended to remain faithful to the choice it had made by allying with Germany and to the obligations of honor that this entailed. In his reply to Churchill, there was also a polemical reference to the "initiative taken in 1935 by your government to organize sanctions against Italy in Geneva, a country committed to securing a little space under the

African sun without causing the slightest harm to your interests and territories or those of others" and to the "state of outright slavery in which Italy finds itself in its own sea." But they went no further than this confirmation. And—far more significantly—Mussolini did not go any further either when, on May 16, speaking at Palazzo Venezia to the Trentino leadership,[23] he took issue with those "remnant" elements within the party who "would prefer not to fight" (because "fear is stronger than they are," "because they still harbor 'affections,'" because "they let themselves be carried away by sentiment") or "pray and have others pray for peace," and announced that Italy would enter the war. He announced it in a categorical tone and with a whole series of arguments:

At this particular moment, we who have always preached from this balcony the need to prepare a warrior youth, extolling the "forest of bayonets," cannot remain behind closed shutters... If it is true—as it is—that the map of Europe is being redrawn today, it is equally true that Italy cannot remain outside the conflict; in that case, peace would be made without Italy and against it, and our homeland would fall from its role as a great world power to

22 DDI, vol. IX, IV, pp. 389 ff. (both replies are dated May 18, 1940). W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, op. cit., vol. II, p. 95, will note that the reply had the merit of sincerity.

a second-rate nation; it would be downgraded, and I will never allow that. Our peninsula is not relegated to the margins of Europe, far from the great clashes of nations and outside the course of major history, like Spain. On the contrary, situated as it is at the center between Germany and France, it cannot remain absent from the struggle. As long as the war was confined to Poland and even Norway, we could maintain a state of non-belligerence; but now that the war has reached Lyon and Toulon, and we can almost hear the sound of explosions right within sight of that Mediterranean where Italy is a prisoner, we cannot remain in this position.

Now Italy must finally break out of this iron ring. Furthermore, it must honor its commitments of honor. If this were not to happen, if the Italian people were not to honor their signature, the world's judgment of us would be inexorable... For all the reasons I have given, it is therefore inevitable—I say inevitable—that Italy will intervene, and it will intervene.

But, having reached this point in his speech, he then seemed to backtrack somewhat, displaying a caution that—given the man in question—went beyond what was warranted by the semi-public nature of the speech (not intended for publication, but inevitably destined to become known quickly in Italy and abroad) and instead revealed his desire "not to rush" things, to wait a little longer to see how the ongoing battle would unfold:

"When?" he had concluded curtly. "This is neither the place nor the time to set dates. When the time comes, we will march. By this I do not mean that our action must be imminent, even though history is moving at the rapid pace of armored and motorized divisions."

In short, by mid-May, just as London was not yet one hundred percent certain that Mussolini would enter the war, Mussolini himself had not yet reached the certainty that the "right" moment to intervene had come, and there are some grounds for believing—as incredible as it may seem—that deep down he still harbored doubts and a glimmer of hope that he might be able to avoid it.

Although he spoke constantly of war with Ciano and his other collaborators (but without ever getting specific or setting dates, and giving the impression that he was thinking of a deadline not too far off—on May 19, to Bottai, who wanted to know how much time he would have to administer the exams, he

said: “There’s plenty of time. In the meantime, we are already fulfilling an important function by keeping over half a million men tied down”24) and although he was deeply affected by the succession of German victories to the point of being sometimes shaken by them (General Pricolo’s account of the effect the news of the crossing of the Meuse had on him25 is telling), in the two weeks immediately following the start of the German offensive, there is no record of any initiative that could be cited as evidence of a concrete decision on his part to enter the war within a few days. Documentarily, at least, there is no trace of it, and not even the extensive memoirs of those days offer conclusive evidence. Even an examination of his audiences during those two weeks is of little use. On the whole, they continued at their normal pace and with their usual character; even those of a nature not immediately political or “ceremonial” (which were not suspended). Aside from a sudden summons on the morning of May 10—after receiving news of the German attack—of the three military undersecretaries,[26] there is no indication that meetings with the heads of the armed forces increased significantly; through May 28, Badoglio was received only twice (on the morning of the 20th for thirty-eight minutes and on the afternoon of the 28th for twenty-seven) and Soddu and Graziani were also received only twice. If anything, Mussolini had more frequent contact than usual with Ministers Teruzzi and Host-Venturi and with General Favagrossa, who had been the new Commissioner for War Production since the previous year.[27]

Rather than rushing to set a date for intervention—with all that this entailed (consider that technical measures such as instructions to ships at sea on how to proceed upon the outbreak of hostilities and arrangements to entrust a neutral state—Brazil—with the protection of Italian interests in enemy countries were not taken until May 25 and 29)— everything indicates that until May 27–28, Mussolini —while waiting to see what turn the ongoing fighting would take[28]—was primarily concerned with the “moral preparation” of the Italian people and with obtaining command of the armed forces from the king. Even the more strictly military aspects of participation in the conflict concerned him relatively little.

In the preceding months—as we have seen—Mussolini, in order to justify the dramatic difficulties his foreign policy had brought upon him

26 It is likely that at this meeting Mussolini issued instructions to ensure that the armed forces were prepared for a possible entry into the war from the end of the month onward. This can be inferred from the letter written to him the following day by Balbo, to whom he must have transmitted the order directly. See Army General Staff—Historical Office, *The Advance on Sidi el Barrani*, op. cit., pp. 172 ff.; as well as in G. Ciano, *Diary*, op. cit., p. 428, where General Soddu’s opinion is mentioned that no initiative should be taken for at least another month.

28 On May 21, U.S. Ambassador Phillips telegraphed Washington that Mussolini was merely waiting to see how the military situation in Belgium and France would unfold: if the Germans had broken through the Allied front, “Mussolini would probably have judged that Italy’s moment had come.” See C. Hull, *Memoirs of Peace and War*, op. cit., I, p. 305.

Once in office, he had accused the military leaders of having “deceived” and “betrayed” him. In the years that followed, in the face of the setbacks suffered by the Italian armed forces on various fronts, these accusations would resurface once again. In reality—and it is worth repeating this once more— Mussolini was well aware of the true state of military preparedness. Serious charges—of a technical, cultural, and above all political nature—can and must be leveled against the Italian military leaders (albeit with the limitations stemming from the far graver responsibilities of Victor Emmanuel III), but it would be unfair and inconsistent with reality to give credence to the accusations made against them by

Mussolini and repeated, even after the fall of fascism, by various authors, both fascist and non-fascist. We will discuss the state of readiness of the armed forces, their strength, and the industrial infrastructure supporting them in the next volume. For now, it suffices to say that Mussolini had been—and remained until the very last day of "non-belligerence"—kept thoroughly informed of all this by those in charge. A vast body of published documentation proves this beyond a shadow of a doubt, not to mention the memoirs. The "Duce" was fully aware of the extreme precariousness of Italy's military preparedness; he knew very well that, according to military leaders, it would still take three to five years for the armed forces to be capable of facing a major modern conflict, and that they asserted that, at that time, Italy could barely sustain six months of "limited" war. Having clarified this point, however, if one wishes to understand Mussolini's behavior, it is necessary to clarify another point immediately. The previous year, in August, military unpreparedness, combined with the prospect of a long, hard, and uncertain war, had been one of the reasons that had led Mussolini to decide on "non-belligerence." Now the situation appeared to have changed completely. As the days passed, France seemed, against all predictions, on the verge of being defeated and definitively sidelined, with no possibility for England to prevent it. From this perspective, the war seemed to be heading toward a rapid conclusion, given that it appeared entirely unlikely that, once France was defeated, England could continue to fight alone and, in any case, would be able to withstand a possible German attack on its territory; nor did it seem likely that the United States would become directly and timely involved in the conflict if it had not done so when it could have tried to save France and use it as a bridgehead on the European continent. Today we know full well how wrong these predictions were. The fact remains, however, that at the time many—even within the democratic camp itself—shared this view, and not just Mussolini, who, moreover, was influenced by other factors as well. These ranged from ideological considerations to a fear of the Germans, which grew stronger in him with each passing day[29]: if Germany were to defeat everyone, what could possibly prevent it from exacting revenge on Italy, securing a "window" onto the Adriatic[30] and total hegemony over the Danube-Balkan region, and, possibly, compensating for the defeat of France and, above all, England at Italy's expense? With matters having reached this point, it is clear that Mussolini's decision depended solely on the course of the ongoing struggle in France. If it had seemed certain that France would be defeated and forced to withdraw from the conflict, the "Duce" would have had no other option but to honor the "promise" he had made to Hitler and, therefore, to intervene. In addition to allowing him to share in the victory and reap the external and internal benefits that he otherwise could not have secured, only this would have safeguarded him from German wrath and, at least for the time being, from their greed.[31]

In this situation, the real problem for Mussolini was choosing the right moment to intervene; not before France's defeat was certain, nor after it had already become blatantly inevitable—to the point of rendering his intervention clearly useless and morally too discrediting; by then, the issue of military unpreparedness had become so secondary as to seem almost irrelevant32. Once France's defeat was certain—with all that it entailed according to Mussolini's predictions—the military problem would, in fact, lose much of its importance. What mattered was being present on the battlefield, contributing to France's final defeat, and above all serving as an additional deterrent to compel it to capitulate (it is quite significant in this regard that at first, once the decision to intervene had finally been made, Mussolini confirmed the strategic directives of the March 31 memorandum—namely, not to go on the offensive even

30 Regarding the fear that Hitler might lay his hands on Trieste, see O. Dinale, *Forty Years of Conversations with Him*, op. cit., p. 170: "You do not appreciate as you should the gravest of my responsibilities, should we arrive at the peace table without our presence, leaving Hitler entirely free to treat our country far worse than Clemenceau treated it at Versailles. One can never be too cautious with that troublesome ally of ours, who, more than Goethe, more than Frederick the Great, or any other

German colossus, has the Nibelung mysteries on his mind and invokes Wotan; moreover, as a good Austrian, he knows full well that Trieste lies on the road to Baghdad. I'd bet my head on it—and I'm telling you this in strict confidence—that he wouldn't hesitate for a moment to snatch Trieste from us in homage to the sacred demands of the Greater Reich's living space. And I won't hide from you that such a concern beats insistently at the gates of my subconscious and casts a dark shadow over the euphoria of Dunkirk."

against the French[33]) and, if possible, to discourage the British from continuing the fight as well; in the worst-case scenario, to hold the outlying positions and fight at sea while the Germans attacked the British Isles. And Mussolini was convinced that the Italian armed forces, however unprepared, were capable of doing this. The minutes of the meeting he held on May 29 with Badoglio and the three Chiefs of Staff contain two significant statements of his on this subject.[34] One is of a more general and political nature:

The current situation allows for no further delay, because otherwise we face greater dangers than those that might have been caused by premature intervention.

The other refers explicitly to the army's situation:

I consider this situation not ideal but satisfactory. On the other hand, if we were to delay for two weeks or a month, we would not improve our situation, while we might give Germany the impression that we are arriving after the fact, when the risk is minimal—not to mention the consideration that it is not in our moral character to strike a man who is about to fall. All of this, ultimately, could prove serious at the time of the final peace.

Which is, in essence, what he said a week later in different words to General F. Rossi, head of the Quartermaster Department of the General Staff[35]:

If I were to wait until the Army was ready, I would have to enter the war years from now, whereas I must enter immediately. We will do what we can.

Given this logic, it is hardly surprising that if there was one "military" issue Mussolini focused on particularly during these weeks, it was securing supreme command of the armed forces. That this was a long-standing ambition of his is evidenced by what he said in the Senate on March 30, 1938, in the famous speech on military budgets that had served as the prelude to the events leading to his first appointment as Marshal. Ever since the war in Ethiopia, Mussolini had been convinced that he was a great strategist, and although in reality his mindset was as far removed from a military one as one could imagine, the idea of personally directing the war—even strategically—fascinated him and must have seemed to him like the final crowning touch to his glory. Added to this were, on the one hand, his deep contempt and distrust of military leaders and, on the other hand, his jealousy of Hitler: if the Führer was the supreme commander of the German armed forces, then he, too, had to be. And finally, there was another reason for wanting to be the supreme commander, one that was far more political and practical: once the war was over, Mussolini was determined to put an end to the monarchy. Hence the absolute necessity for him to prevent the king from gaining any merit in the eyes of the Italians through the war. Merit and glory were to belong solely and entirely to the "Duce," who had wanted the war and won it, not to the "useless" and "cumbersome" monarchy that had not wanted it, had tried until the very end to prevent it, and had served as the rallying point for all those who had attempted to oppose it.

Knowing how jealous Victor Emmanuel III was of his prerogatives and how much the military

leadership stood in solidarity with the king on this issue as well—eager for a solution that would restore the hierarchical relationship between the sovereign and the Chief of the General Staff that had existed in 1915–18 (so much so that Badoglio had begun raising the issue as early as the beginning of April[36])— Mussolini had no qualms about resorting to every means and every argument—not least the threat of presenting the sovereign with a fait accompli—to convince the king to cede supreme command to him. A typical example is this entry, dated May 14, 1940, in the diary of General Puntoni, the king's first aide-de-camp[37]:

At 5:30 p.m., I went to see Soddu, who, through Sorice, had asked me to come to the Ministry. He spoke to me about the issue of the High Command and the need, in the event of war, to have a leader who could coordinate the actions of the undersecretaries and the Chiefs of Staff of the three branches of the armed forces.

I immediately understand what he's getting at, partly because I had already caught wind of the matter from a few remarks made by His Majesty this morning during the usual briefing. Soddu, in fact, quickly makes it clear to me that the Duce, in the event of a conflict, aspires to become the political and military commander of the war, but that he has not yet decided to discuss this with the King because he is certain that His Majesty would not be in favor of such a measure. Soddu also explains to me the reasons that would support this solution and says that, given the nature of the likely coming war—during which our forces would be called upon to operate simultaneously in various theaters of operations, such as the Western Alps, the eastern border, the Balkans, East Africa, and Libya—the existence of a single political and military command would be extremely useful. He says: "In a total war, it is politics that must show the way to the commander, and military operations must be conducted in close coordination with it, seeking to avoid any friction between the political leader and the military leader. It would therefore be an excellent solution to consolidate these two responsibilities in a single person. Responsibilities that

p. 37, P. Puntoni, *Vittorio Emanuele III Speaks*, Milan 1958, pp. 11 ff. According to Umberto di Savoia, Mussolini also invoked another argument: the Germans were allies who were anything but respectful of protocol; it was therefore advisable not to expose the sovereign to "unpleasant encounters." See S. Maurano, "Mussolini and My Father the King," in *La Settimana Incom Illustrata*, January 31, 1959.

"Perhaps it is best not to burden the Crown, so that the Crown may save the country in the event that the regime begins to falter or even threatens to collapse."

On the other hand, in practice, even during the past conflict, while remaining the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, His Majesty left the actual conduct of operations—along with the associated responsibilities and the honors deriving from victory—to the Chiefs of Staff who succeeded one another during the years of struggle.

Soddu adds, following these remarks, that alongside the Duce there would be a Chief of Staff—professionally qualified, a true conductor—a man, he says, who naturally commands the esteem of all three branches of the Armed Forces. "That man," the undersecretary specifies, "in my opinion, could only be Badoglio." He points out that time is running out and that the situation could force Italy to enter the war at any moment. The decision should therefore be made immediately. He says that if His Majesty were to agree to this course of action, it would be best for the initiative to come from the Sovereign himself to avoid the surprise of seeing the decree published before royal assent.

Despite the urgency with which the request had been presented, the sovereign still tried to stall for about fifteen days, thereby reinforcing Mussolini's resolve to do away with the monarchy once the war was over.[38] In the end, however, when Italy's entry into the war was now imminent, he naturally had to capitulate. Having yielded on the fundamental issue, it would have been absurd to oppose Mussolini on the matter of supreme command. Nevertheless, so as not to yield entirely, he resorted to the expedient of formally retaining supreme command and "entrusting" to the "Duce" only "command of the troops operating on all fronts."[39]

To understand why Victor Emmanuel III ultimately accepted the intervention—why he "resigned himself" to it*—it is not enough to point to the impact of the resounding German successes and the ultra-optimistic predictions that Mussolini must have made to him in order to overcome his resistance.[41] The German successes undoubtedly shook him as well, but, nevertheless, the king remained

40 The expression is G. Ciano's; see his *Diario*, op. cit., p. 438, dated June 1: "By now he is resigned —nothing more than resigned—to the idea of war. He believes that, in reality, France and England have suffered tremendously severe blows, but he attaches—and rightly so—great importance to a possible American intervention. He feels that the country is going to war without enthusiasm: there is interventionist propaganda today, but there is not in the least the same momentum that existed in 1915. 'Those who speak of a short and easy war are deluding themselves. There are still many unknowns, and the outlook is very different from that of May 1915.'"

41 A note by P. Puntoni is significant in this regard, in *Parla Vittorio Emanuele III*, op. cit., p. 11. Dated May 11, following the news that Mussolini had had the sovereign read Hitler's letter—delivered to him the previous day—the note reads: "A disastrous situation for the Allies and ultra-optimistic forecasts for the German offensive currently underway. France will be defeated by June and England by July!" Since no such prediction was made in Hitler's letter and the offensive had begun only two days earlier—unless the date of the note is incorrect—it is evident that the predictions must have come from Mussolini. And they were made ad hoc, given that at that time the "Duce" was not yet even considering such a resounding victory in such a short time. It is therefore clear that his intent was to "work on" the king just in case.

He was deeply opposed to participating in the conflict, even though he eventually came to accept it.[42] What made him opposed was his deep-seated distrust and hostility toward the Germans (which, however, was not matched by any sympathy for the British, much less the French), his conviction that, if it were not brought to a swift conclusion, the war could still have disastrous consequences for Italy; and the more fundamental conviction dictated by his pessimism and realism, which he summarized to General Puntoni on May 15 by saying: "One never knows where such steps might lead"43—a remark that referred as much to the final outcome of the conflict as to the repercussions that, as we have already seen, he felt it would have domestically and, above all, on the fortunes of the dynasty. If we refer to what he said on May 15 to his first aide-de-camp,[44] we might think that on the other side of the scale there was only the nagging doubt that, at least in part, must have been planted by his personal esteem for Mussolini, which, despite everything, remained alive within him: "On the other hand, more often than not, those who are absent are in the wrong!" This was all the more true given that, in the face of the resounding successes achieved by the Germans in France, optimism and confidence—but also fear—were spreading among many of those who until then had been opposed to intervention and whose opposition had reinforced that of the sovereign. A telling example can be found in the memoirs of R. Paolucci, a man close to nationalist circles and the court[45]:

And it was repeatedly told to the King that the war was about to end, that we would not be able to sit at the peace table, that victorious Germany—which believed itself betrayed—would seek a pretext to attack us, that an opportunity like that would not present itself to Italy again for many centuries, and that he, the King, would bear the tremendous responsibility of having failed to seize the opportunity to finally grant us mastery of our own sea.

Finally, according to Umberto di Savoia,[46] two factors in particular influenced his father's decision: the shift in public opinion, which had become "euphoric" at the prospect of easy victories, and the fear that, otherwise, Italy would be invaded and devastated by the Germans within a few weeks. In reality, what primarily sidelined Victor Emmanuel III was his procrastination in the preceding months. When he could have removed Mussolini without great difficulty (barring the uncertainty of a German intervention), he had overestimated the risks and had not decided to act, probably thinking he still had time, if absolutely necessary, to do so. Now not only was there no time left, but—more importantly—Mussolini's position had become so strong, and was growing stronger by the day, that removing him had become impossible. And, in a certain sense, the king would even acknowledge this. In September 1945 and February 1940, Vittorio Emanuele III was presented with two questionnaires aimed at shedding light on his twenty-year relationship with fascism and gathering evidence to counter the accusations leveled against him by the anti-fascists. In both, of course, the issue of intervention was also addressed. In his response to the first questionnaire, the king limited himself to asserting his "tenaciously sustained struggle" against entering the war and to stating that he had repeatedly spoken to Mussolini "about the numerous deficiencies in the army's weapons, clothing, etc." and had ensured that Mussolini "met with some generals who informed him of the true state of our military preparedness."47 A response that said nothing. In response to the second questionnaire, however, the sovereign made an admission that, in its brutal frankness, on the one hand succinctly clarifies the issue and, on the other, reveals the full extent of his responsibility for having let the opportune moment to try to remove Mussolini slip by: "at that time, one could not oppose the Head of Government"[48]. This statement brings us back to the discussion of the "moral preparedness" of the Italians and, more generally, to the repercussions of the campaign in France on public opinion.

42 The fact that the sovereign would agree not to oppose Italy's entry into the war had been clear at least since May 12, when he agreed to confer upon Göring the Collar of the Annunciation (see G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 430)—an honor he had until then tried to withhold. G. Artieri, *Cronaca del Regno d'Italia*, op. cit., II, p. 600, also places the decision "in the king's mind" in mid-May. It is significant that some, such as Marshal E. Caviglia, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 255, on June 10, believed until the very end that the king should at least, "to distinguish his own responsibility," refrain from signing "any document" relating to the declaration of war and allow it to take place without a true official declaration.

46 S. Maurano, *Mussolini and My Father the King*, op. cit. According to the same account, Mussolini (whom the king advised to consult the Grand Council, having received the reply that it was an advisory body for constitutional matters, lacking jurisdiction over issues pertaining to government activity) "feared that by allowing Germany to prevail on its own, he would remain in a position of excessive inferiority vis-à-vis that ally whom, deep down, he did not love and of whom he was, in a certain sense, afraid."

German operations in Norway—as has been noted—had already exerted a considerable influence on the tone and content of the press and radio, causing them to adopt a more markedly pro-German stance than in previous months. The start of operations against France also brought about a real qualitative leap in this area, one that involved the party as well, which until then had remained largely on the

sidelines and had been more engaged in “internal” activities—directed toward its own active members and those of affiliated organizations (especially youth groups)—than toward the general public.

47 p. Puntoni, *Parla Vittorio Emanuele III*, op. cit., p. 290. The reference to “a certain general” whom Mussolini met at the king’s request refers to Marshal Caviglia. See E. Caviglia, *Diario*, op. cit., pp. 204 ff. (September 21, 1939) and 215 ff. (January 12, 1940); as well as N. D’Aroma, *Ventanni insieme*, op. cit., pp. 293 ff.

Unfortunately, since virtually all of the PNF’s documentation and all that of its major affiliated organizations has been destroyed, little or nothing specific can be said about the party’s contribution to this qualitative leap. We do not believe, however, that we are mistaken in asserting that the PNF’s mobilization must have taken place primarily after Mussolini’s speech to the Trentino leadership and along the same lines. Until that moment, the party’s initiative must still have been relatively limited, uncertain, and confined mostly to a few localities, particularly Rome. In the capital, as early as the night between May 10 and 11, a large number of anti-British posters had been put up, and various acts of violence were subsequently reported against newsstands, newspaper vendors, and readers of the *Osservatore Romano*, which had published the Pope’s messages to the sovereigns of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.[49] And even after Mussolini’s speech, the limited information at our disposal suggests that the party’s actions essentially took the form of “surveillance” and “repression” of those suspected of anti-fascism and of those best known for their pro-British, pro-French, and anti-German sentiments, and above all, “deterrence” against the sale and reading of the *Osservatore Romano*[50]—the only alternative voice that, in theory, could circulate in the country and which, as such, they sought to silence[51]. Other activities included irredentist propaganda, especially among young people, aimed at keeping alive Italy’s “sacrosanct” claims against France and England, and the organization of a number of demonstrations and initiatives of an interventionist nature.

49 On May 13, the Swiss legation in Rome reported to Bern: “With regard to relations between Italy and the Allies, we can note certain demonstrations that reveal the effects of the systematic propaganda currently being carried out to stir up public opinion, especially against England, by spreading the idea that so far England has suffered nothing but setbacks and that its fleet is far from being as invincible and fearsome as people had been led to believe.”

“1 . During the night from Friday to Saturday, May 11, the walls of houses throughout the city were covered with thousands of posters titled “The Failure of England,” which featured excerpts from statements by Mr. Chamberlain regarding the Allies’ failures in Norway. On the 12th, more posters were put up, stating that “England has missed the bus.” The fact that some people attempted to tear down these posters led to numerous incidents. Care was taken not to post them on the buildings of foreign missions. Everyone was struck by this display of, to say the least, questionable taste, intended to inflame passions and ruin whatever regard might still exist for England and France” (ASAE, General Secretariat, p. 232).

Regarding the incidents on the night of May 10–11, the PNF sent Mussolini a “memo” worded as follows: “Last night, the well-known posters were put up, and an intensive patrol service was deployed: several beatings occurred, particularly on Via Veneto and also against foreigners (one Dutchman and several Englishmen) who dared to tear down the posters; Regarding two British nationals who took refuge at the Karlton Hotel after the incident, the Chargé d’Affaires was asked to intervene; he initially refused, for the sake of provocation, to return to the Embassy unless protected by law enforcement. He

was later persuaded to do so. Two unknown individuals, in the Gianicolense district, fired three shots from a revolver at our personnel who were putting up posters as they drove by in an open-top car; when pursued, they abandoned the car: they will be identified.

"It is worth noting that no such incident occurred against the working masses, who appeared truly elated upon reading the poster" (ACS, Ministry of Popular Culture, b. 11, file 154).

During his farewell visit as ambassador to the Holy See on May 13, Alfieri pointed out to the Pope that the messages he had sent to the sovereigns of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg had been a cause "of deep displeasure for the Head of Government, who saw them as a move against his policy," and insinuated that, given "the state of great tension prevailing in Fascist circles," it could not be ruled out that "something serious" might happen. Pius XII replied, calmly and serenely, "that he had no fear of ending up, if necessary, in a concentration camp or in hostile hands" (ADSS, I, pp. 453 ff.) as well as G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 430. On May 22, as the violence and threats against the *Osservatore Romano* continued to the point where it was almost impossible to distribute the paper, the nuncio raised the issue with Buffarini-Guidi. Buffarini-Guidi assured him that the violence would be prevented and the newspaper distributed—if necessary, under police protection—and sought to shift the blame onto the Rome federal official, Ippolito, "Starace's puppet," who, in his view, had gone too far with Muti (ADSS, I, pp. 467 ff.).

In the early days, and indeed later on as well, the tools Mussolini relied on most to "raise awareness" among the masses were the press and radio. And the most significant initiative was the release of the so-called "Pietromarchi report," a very lengthy "memo" from the head of the Economic Warfare Office at Palazzo Chigi, which set forth in detail—and in highly undiplomatic language—the extremely serious damage inflicted on the Italian economy by the naval blockade and the "petty" and "oppressive" manner in which the Anglo-French authorities were enforcing the relevant controls.[52] That the document's purpose was essentially to be distributed to the press and to serve as a new, powerful, and "objective" "boost" to war propaganda is demonstrated by the precise and detailed instructions that Pavolini gave to the press on May 1 regarding how to use it. The document, "based on facts and solely on facts," was to be given the utmost prominence ("Please lay it out over as much space as possible so that it is clearly legible and invites reading"), and as for the tone of the commentary, it "must not be

51 Among the various accounts of Mussolini's violent animosity toward the Church during these weeks, see G. Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., p. 429, dated May 12: "The Pope's telegrams to the sovereigns of the three invaded states have outraged Mussolini, who would like to put a stop to the Vatican, being willing as he is to go to extreme lengths. In recent days, he has been repeating that the Papacy is the cancer gnawing at our national life; and that he intends—if necessary—to settle this problem once and for all. He added: 'Let the Pope not think of seeking alliances within the Monarchy, for I am ready to blow both of them up together. The seven cities of Romagna are enough to eliminate both the King and the Pope at the same time.'"

52 See DDI, vol. IX, IV, pp. 315 ff. A second "Pietromarchi report," aimed at providing an update on the implementation of the blockade against Italian trade in recent weeks and at refuting the rebuttals and justifications that the first report had provoked in London and Paris, was released to the press on the eve of the Italian intervention, on June 9. See ibid., pp. 610 ff. It concluded with these telling words: "As far as the Italian people are specifically concerned, the diversions, the detentions, seizures of goods, postal censorship, and export bans have tangibly and irreconcilably shown them that, in a situation such as that which exists in the Mediterranean, their freedom, their right to live, and the very

possibility of working and developing can be nullified or seriously endangered at any moment by the will of a non-Mediterranean power. This is the precise lesson of nine months of ‘control’.”

“clear, firm, and even violent.” And this, it should be noted, at a time when—even while giving ample space to German press releases and correspondence from Germany—it was still recommended for wartime operations to “limit oneself, for the rest, to publishing press releases from other nations” —a certain formal objectivity53 was still recommended for war operations, in order to avoid the risk of denials, of “disappointments,” but also of excessive “enthusiasm” that Mussolini considered counterproductive, because it would have made it difficult for him both to wait longer before entering the war and to later claim that Italy’s intervention had been decisive. In this regard, it is extremely significant how Pavolini opened his briefing to journalists on May 25:[54]

Operations in the West are proceeding as everyone knows, and since they are going excellently, it is obviously pointless to exaggerate. Therefore, stick to the truth. In particular, when speaking of Anglo-French defeats, present them for what they are—that is, case by case as defeats with all the gravity naturally inherent in them—but do not speak, at least for now, of total catastrophe or collapse, etc. This is, first of all, to avoid devaluing the upcoming German battles (because, obviously, if the Franco-British were already in disarray, the rest of what is to come would appear to be a very minor matter); and second, so as not to downplay our intervention and our position, which up to this point has served to keep focused on us not only part of the naval fleet and air forces, but no fewer than 1,300,000 soldiers at a time when France was in desperate need of divisions. These forces remain intact, so we must absolutely avoid any downplaying of their significance, I repeat, especially with regard to our position.

Various police and intelligence reports indicate that the “Pietromarchi report” had a wide resonance among the public. A careful reading of the sources in question, however, makes it clear that, apart from limited Fascist sectors already firmly aligned, its effect on the whole must not have

Regarding the degree of objectivity to be employed in reporting on wartime events, Pavolini expressed himself in the following terms: “In the newspaper’s overall approach, keep in mind that in this regard we are objective—or strive to be so—with respect to facts that it is in no one’s interest to distort, not least because subsequent denials produce even worse effects. However, we are not objective regarding the meaning to be attributed to these facts, because we have a very clear stance that we have no interest in changing—though we do wish to clarify, elaborate on, and make it ever clearer and more uncompromising.”

54 Ibid., report of May 25, 1940. The same report further stated: “As regards speeches, telegrams, various events, etc. in short, for everything concerning the intervention, we must always present them as expressions of the sentiments of the Italian people, who feel more than ever under the Duce’s command, but we must never forget to attribute the decision on the matter solely to him, absolutely avoiding any appearance of influence or pressure on his will, because this is not the position of those who gather and demonstrate. For while everyone may obviously hope for this outcome, officially speaking, each of us knows that we hope only to be worthy of the Duce’s command at the moment when he alone can decide. Therefore, in a certain sense, we must avoid giving the impression of pressure or anything else in the interventionist campaign. It is a gradual intensification of tone that we are all undertaking together, and this gradual intensification has taken place and will continue to increase, but this in no way implies pressure on the will from above. It is a preparation of the minds within a state that intends to remain authoritarian and totalitarian.”

It was not at all what had been expected. Rather than stirring up sentiment against England and France, it dampened it. Coinciding with the news of the start of the German offensive, it was in fact understood above all as the announcement of new and dramatic developments in Fascist policy and dashed both the latest, almost universal hopes for an indefinite extension of “non-belligerence” and the “optimism regarding a negotiated peace in which legitimate interests would find their full satisfaction” which were still present in some more strictly fascist circles.55 The very first reports of the German offensive had an even more negative effect. The violation of Belgian, Dutch, and Luxembourgish neutrality reawakened in many people memories of the events of 1914 and sparked an anti-German psychosis, which was particularly intense in the northern regions but widespread throughout the country. Two reports, both from PNF informants, provide a clear picture of the reaction these events provoked. One, dated May 11, refers to Turin: “:

The news reported by this morning’s newspapers and broadcast on the radio at 1:00 p.m. regarding the German invasion of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg has made a deep impression on the entire citizenry of Turin and is met with nothing but indignation. The vast majority of the population could find no words to condemn this act of aggression, and many openly wondered whether the time had come to tell Germany that it was time to put an end to its bullying. Everyone’s thoughts then turned to the Princess of Piedmont (who is much beloved in Turin), and all sympathized with the fate of Belgium, which, for the second time in just a few years, finds itself invaded and devastated by the Germans, simply for refusing to bow to their overbearing demands that undermine its sovereignty.

This outrage was shared today by every segment of Turin’s population, regardless of social class, and the harshest critics were humble workers who had fought in World War I.

Even the few sympathies that might have existed toward German aspirations have now vanished in the face of this new aggression, and everyone is wondering what our country will decide in light of these events. Any action in support of Germany is ruled out from the outset, as it would be so unpopular with our population.

The other report, from three days later, refers instead to Milan and conveys much more clearly the situation and the sense of utter despair that, for most people, accompanied their hostility toward the Germans:[57]

On the morning of the day in question, news of the new serious German move against Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg spread rapidly. The afternoon editions of the newspapers were snapped up by the astonished and dismayed crowd.

57 ACS, PNF, Political Situation of the Province, “Milan.” In a “memo for the Duce” dated May 17, the situation in Milan was summarized as follows: “Reports from Milan indicate that following the

The initial general impression was one of intense emotion and a sense of bewilderment. Faces contorted in expressions of heartfelt astonishment were seen on the midday trams. Feverish communications to acquaintances and friends—conveyed more by gestures than by words—and expressions suggesting that events were imminent here as well were overheard in all places where people gathered.

“Here we go! Now we have to get ready!”—“What a disaster!”—“Poor people!” and other remarks of this nature were the most common reactions from the public.

There was no shortage of expressions of indignation against Germany and of rebellion against this new move targeting neutral states.

By late afternoon, a greater sense of objectivity had taken hold among the public, and the different factions became clearly defined. The majority maintained a reserved and cool demeanor, tacitly revealing their opposition. A strong faction, on the other hand, began to side with Germany, and a few small groups of students began staging public demonstrations. A few more passionate dissenters even publicly expressed their aversion to Germany's new move, a sentiment felt and unchallenged by the citizens who were listening.

On the evening of the 10th, many organized groups gathered in Piazza del Duomo and in the Galleria. A few small groups of participants carried national flags and Hitlerian flags. A sort of rally and public meeting began, drawing a fairly large crowd.

It was noted, however, that a large portion of the onlookers certainly did not look like enthusiastic demonstrators, but rather like worried and discontented people.

I did, however, get the impression that the currents of strong hostility toward Germany did not manifest themselves as clearly as one might have reasonably expected, given the signs previously observed and the impressions gained during the occupation of Denmark and Norway.

One commentator, speaking to friends about his impressions, stated that we are living on the eve of war —not marked by passion, but by exasperation. The people are resisting the media campaign and remain utterly cold, even though they have now resigned themselves to the certainty of an intervention that is now inevitable.

However, just a few days were enough to change this situation. Faced with the succession of German victories, not only did the vast majority of the political class and a portion of the military become interventionist (as early as May 13, Caviglia had to note despondently that even "many senators already see the Germans in Paris and London" and that 'there are many senators and quite a few military officers who see in the German successes a turning point in international events,' the public mood can be summarized as follows:

- The vast majority, comprising people from all social classes, wishes to continue working peacefully for as long as possible while awaiting developments and, in the meantime, disapproves of the violence perpetrated by elements deemed irresponsible.

- A fairly significant group, consisting mainly of members of the middle class, makes no secret of its opposition to the war.

- A minority, consisting of young students and the most ardent fascists, hopes for our imminent intervention and seizes every opportunity to stage demonstrations.

" It is, however, beyond doubt that the overwhelming majority of Milanese have no sympathy for Germany.

"With regard to the recent demonstrations, it should be noted that the population stayed away" (L'Italia antifascista dal 1922 al 1940, op. cit., II, p. 481).

“our own fault”[58]), but public opinion—as had already begun to occur, albeit to a much lesser extent, during the Norwegian campaign—quickly began to diverge. Other motivations and, above all, other sentiments took shape and spread, overlapping with one another across virtually all social classes—especially among the middle and lower middle classes, a segment of the working class, and young people in particular. While indignation and hostility toward the Germans had predominated in the very first days, what now came to the fore was concern for Italy’s future; but soon after, so too did hope for a swift end to the war, disappointment at the Allies’ inability to stand up to the Germans, admiration for the Germans, and above all, a great deal of confusion regarding their intentions. Reports from prefects and informants clearly reflect this rapid shift and its subsequent developments. Ciano, who reviewed them daily through Bocchini and Muti, summarized their essence in his diary on May 17 in these terms:[59]

News from the French front reports a sweeping German advance... Italian public opinion (I am referring to the honest segment and leaving aside the clownish politicians, who have all become die-hard Germanophiles) is reacting strangely to this news: admiration for the Germans, euphoria at the thought of a swift end to the war, and above all, great concern for the future.

Two days later, Bottai noted in turn:[60]

People are aligning themselves with the Germans in the war. A war of interest; certainly not an alliance of love.

At the time Bottai made this note, the phenomenon was just beginning and relatively confined to specific, largely limited areas of the country, being more pronounced only in certain localities and particularly in Rome.[61] A week later, it had already spread considerably. Hostile to any prospect of Italian participation in the war remained, above all, the rural areas—particularly those with a strong Catholic presence—and, among the major cities, Milan, which until the very end was certainly the most anti-German and opposed to intervention.[62] The upper middle class was generally hostile, due to tradition, culture, and self-interest. The working class was also overwhelmingly hostile, viewing the war as a

62 In a report by a PNF informant on the gathering in Piazza del Duomo on June 10, 1940, to hear the speech in which Mussolini announced the declaration of war, we read: “The Duce’s speech was received with disciplined and silent attention, in bitter and stark contrast to the fiery and bombastic cheers of the Roman people, clearly transmitted by the loudspeakers in Piazza del Duomo” (ACS, PNF, Political Situation of the Provinces, “Milan”).

detached from fascism and concerned above all with their own living conditions.[63] Where sentiments were most mixed was among the middle and lower middle classes, who were subject to the most diverse and confused influences and upon whom the full force of the regime’s propaganda was focused, employing every argument—from the most typically fascist and anti-British ones to the more traditional and nationalistic ones— but essentially one in particular—the one best suited at that moment to make an impact and encapsulate all the others: *vae neutris!*M. Less than twenty days after the start of the German offensive, a profound change was already underway. Recalling those days and how he had experienced them from his vantage point at the OVRA, G. Leto wrote65:

Our informants reported—first sporadically, then with greater frequency and scope—a rapidly spreading sense of fear that Germany was on the verge of bringing the terrible conflict to a brilliant conclusion all on its own and that, as a result, we—though ideologically allied—would be left without

any benefit from what had been achieved in line with our national aspirations... Just as in August 1939 the police noted and reported the country's nearly unanimous opposition to a military adventure, so too in the spring of 1940 they reported a reversal in public opinion, driven by an obsessive fear of being too late.

The collapse of the Maginot Line, the failure to achieve a "second Marne," and Dunkirk were all decisive moments in the spread of this state of mind, attested not only by police reports but also by memoirs—and not just those with a political agenda.

Let it be clear, however, that this does not mean that all Italians became interventionists, that many—even while convinced that France and England had by then lost the war—would have preferred to maintain neutrality, nor that those who did become interventionists did so with the conviction and enthusiasm that had characterized the interventionism of 1915; nor that the alliance with Germany suddenly became popular. It is certain, however, that this particular interventionist mindset—in which the fear of "arriving too late" was inseparable from the conviction that the war would be very brief and, indeed, often drew its most genuine justification from that very conviction—spread throughout a large part of the country and constituted the foundation upon which true Fascist interventionism—undoubtedly present, but insufficient in itself to shape the environment —to operate in an attempt to give it a content more in line, as will be seen in the next volume, with its conception of the "Fascist war." Nor was the decidedly hostile—but, all things considered, ultimately resigned—attitude of the Holy See67 sufficient to contain its spread, even though a significant portion of the clergy most in contact with the faithful was often swept up by it68. Thus, G. Amendola is correct when he writes[69]: the truth is that, in the face of Hitler's victory, there was a general collapse, a surrender to the inevitability of the event, and a weakness in interpreting and defending national interests—a weakness that spread from the regime's leadership to all Italians.

63 In the report cited in the previous note, for example, we read: "The establishments frequented by workers, on the other hand, have fallen into a general silence. No opposition, but also a lack of any expression or attitude of support!" Some general observations on the attitude of the various social classes can be found in F. Anfuso, *From Palazzo Venezia to Lake Garda*, op. cit., pp. 123 ff....

66 It is not without significance that attempts to revive and adapt to the new conflict certain slogans and a particular conception of war—which, in 1914–15, had enjoyed some success among intellectuals and the middle class—not only fell on deaf ears but also objectively lacked much of their former vigor. See, for example, F. T. Marinetti, "Futurist Necessities of Our War Against France and England," in *Antieuropa*, September–October 1940, pp. 520 ff.

He is also correct when he states[70] that this collapse also engulfed the few and scattered organized anti-fascist groups, paralyzing their capacity for initiative and struggle, and caused damage even among the regime's general opponents:

memoirs, diaries, and letters show how widespread—even within the ranks of the opposition—the damage was caused by the long series of Fascist political victories and, above all, by Hitler's latest overwhelming triumphs. The insidious question—"What if Mussolini were right once again and, with his instinct, had chosen the right moment?"—spread like a disturbing whisper even among the ranks of the small opposition groups.

On May 25—as we have seen—Pavolini, in his briefing to journalists, presented the intervention as a

certainty. Within the Fascist leadership, almost everyone shared his view, and, more importantly, virtually no one publicly declared opposition to it. In military circles, opponents were more numerous, but their opposition did not go beyond hope in the sovereign. A hope that, however, had ceased to take root in economic circles—perhaps the most unanimous at the outset in hoping for neutrality that would last throughout the conflict. In 1939 and the early months of 1940, the spearhead of opposition to intervention had been constituted

67 The “resignation” with which the Holy See ultimately accepted Italian intervention can be explained in various ways. The most likely hypothesis, however, is that it was the result of the conviction—shared even in the Vatican—that the war was now drawing to a close. See, in this regard, R. A. Graham, “W. D’Ormesson’s Mission to the Vatican in 1940,” in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, October 20, 1973, pp. 145 ff.

68 According to a telegram from the ambassador to the Holy See, Attolico, dated June 7 and addressed to Ciano’s cabinet, in the days leading up to that date the Vatican had instructed all bishops “to refrain from any stance contrary to the government’s political directives,” ASAE, Incoming Telegrams, 1940, Series P. R., vol. 292.

In these circles, the steelworkers and metalworkers (the groups that, in theory, should have been the most ardent interventionists)—concerned by German economic policy—had closed ranks around Ciano. By now, however, they too had been forced, albeit reluctantly, to resign themselves to the situation. Partly because they lacked real political clout, and partly because the famous policy of “good business deals” that neutrality was supposed to guarantee them had proven feasible only in a few cases (in the first quarter of 1940, Fiat had nearly quadrupled its foreign orders compared to the corresponding quarter of 1939) and, in any case, sustainable only... with German supplies of raw materials, machinery, and equipment.[71]

Even those who, two weeks earlier, had been staunch neutralists and anti-Germans had by then been convinced—or had come to share the general belief—that the war was about to end with a German victory and that Italy should enter the war. According to Ciano’s diary, even Grandi was beginning to believe he had been wrong.[72] Bottai—again according to Ciano—was said to be “one of the few left with his head on his shoulders,” but what Ciano noted immediately afterward sheds light on the mood of the moment: “Faced with so much interventionism on the part of official circles, he proposed to me the founding of a party: that of the interventionists acting in bad faith” 7\ And, after all, it is highly doubtful that Bottai did not believe the war would soon end, or that, if he did not yet believe it, he would not come to believe it very shortly thereafter—at least judging by certain proposals he presented to Mussolini and Ciano a few weeks after France’s capitulation.[74] Ciano, again in his diary, stated that he remained opposed to the “adventure”: “A horse must be judged over the long haul. And as for this race, no one can even begin to imagine how long it will be.”[75] But when he wrote these words on May 20, he had just returned from delivering a speech in Milan in which, “on Mussolini’s orders,” he had made a clear allusion to the impending intervention.[76] So much so that many sarcastically called him “two-faced Ciano.” Among the top Fascist leaders, the only one who continued to make no secret of his hostility toward intervention was Balbo. Deeply anti-German (“Balbo does not debate the Germans: he hates them. And it is this irreconcilable hatred that guides all his reasoning”[77]), but also anti-French, his hostility toward Mussolini’s policy toward Germany had led him in previous years—he, an old republican and Freemason—to draw closer to the monarchy and, more recently (on December 8, 1939), to seek an audience with the pope. And he had not merely sought to dissuade “that madman” Mussolini from entering the war on purely political grounds: as governor of Libya and commander of the forces in North Africa, he had repeatedly pointed out the inadequacy of the resources at his disposal. But he

had also long insisted that, in the event of war, he be authorized not to remain on the defensive but, on the contrary, to be able to attack decisively to the east. This request goes a long way toward explaining why—despite his chronic insubordination—he was not the sort of man to break with Mussolini (and, all things considered, with the sovereign) at that moment: he might not have agreed with his policies, but he would not "betray" him; his sense of military duty and his Gascon spirit prevented him from doing so, as did, perhaps, the usual doubt that, in the end, Mussolini might once again be right; certainly, his patriotism prevented him from doing so. In this psychological state, having done everything possible to dissuade Mussolini and to secure the necessary resources to fight, his position could only be the one he would articulate to Ciano on June 2: as a soldier, to fight with the utmost determination, doing everything he could with the resources at his disposal.[78] A position that today may, perhaps, seem absurd to some, but which at the time was not at all so, since the conflict between Nazi Germany and its adversaries had not yet, for the vast majority, taken on that ideological character —of radical, moral, and political opposition between two conceptions of the world and of civilization —which would lead all the countries involved to question what had until then been the very idea of the homeland. So much so—we mention the issue here only briefly, reserving the right to address it at length in the next volume—that even among anti-fascists, Italy's participation in the war, albeit as a fascist state, would have raised a series of extremely significant moral dilemmas. Among these were those recalled by L. Gasparotto in a chapter of his book, not coincidentally titled "The Anguish of the Stateless":

As the brief and inglorious campaign against France drew to a close and greater troubles loomed, we met among friends—former colleagues in the government or comrades-in-arms from the Great War—to resolve our moral dilemma. Although we live in our homeland, we are without a homeland; yet our homeland is at war and is staking everything on this conflict; perhaps its very existence is in danger, and we are strangers to it—unwittingly indifferent to its fate—mere bystanders forced to watch from the roadside as the troops march along the paths of death. Giolitti wrote in his Memoirs that, once war is declared, "every citizen, whatever his opinions may be, has a duty to do whatever he can to ensure victory." What, then, is to be done? There were those who proposed sending a message to the "Duce" to express our hope—albeit with reservations regarding our own ideas—for military victory; in fact, a few letters were written—prudent and generous at the same time—to that effect. "Once war has been declared," wrote a noble friend to Mussolini—an involuntary veteran of the previous war and a respected statesman—"opinions cease, and every Italian can do nothing but hope for the victory of our forces and contribute to its achievement." To my quixotic spirit, this seemed an act of humiliation, not to say a servile gesture toward the man whom we had long deemed unworthy of governing the country; for my part, I replied that I would prefer to be called to arms, ready to give the Fatherland the rest of my life, but not the ideas inherited from my father and cherished as the heritage of my soul.

To the one recalled by B. Croce in the third appendix to his *Contribution to the Critique of Myself*[80]:

What distressed me most of all was the impossibility I felt during the final years of Fascism—which were years of war—of being fully on the side of my homeland... But in practice, I resolved this conflict by urging the young people who turned to me for advice to safeguard Italy's military honor and to remember that the army must leave politics to politicians...

And finally, that of E. Conti, which he summarized in these very brief but unequivocal words[81]:

We are at war: "Sileant precordia, pateat cor." Let reason be silent; let obedience take its place.

Among the high-ranking military command, those opposed to intervention were more numerous than

within the Fascist leadership, but by then no one went beyond expressing “reservations” of a technical nature. Badoglio, in particular, was strongly opposed82; unlike Balbo, however, the Chief of the General Staff was careful not to show it, and once the decision to intervene had been made, he would have been keen to demonstrate “the utmost confidence in our victory” and to avoid exposing himself to any accusation of lukewarmness or the like83.

Yet on May 25, Mussolini, despite his desire to enter the war, had not yet made his decision. On May 17, showing Grandi a large map of the French front that he had had placed on an easel next to his desk at Palazzo Venezia, he had told him:

On Badoglio’s position, see also the observations by E. Faldella, *Italy and World War II*, op. cit., pp. 79 ff.

“These Germans believe they have defeated France. They will soon realize how wrong their calculations were. Here there will be a new Marne… Here the Boches will come to a halt for the second time, and Italy can rest easy.”

The next day, with G. Pini expressing confidence alongside him that intervention was imminent and repeatedly voicing his concern “that the Germans are moving too quickly and that we won’t arrive in time to advance our national interest,” he had been more cautious, but—as Pini noted—“every word we spoke implied Italy’s imminent entry into the war.” However, he had never let anything specific slip in that regard.

And on the 19th, as we have seen, he had told Bottai that there was still time... In the days that followed, German successes continued. On May 21, in the Senate, Reynaud (who two days earlier had replaced Gamelin with Weygand as head of the French army) had spoken openly of the “fatherland in danger,” and the Germans had reached Abbeville and Amiens. There was no hope for a “second Marne.” Yet Mussolini had still not made up his mind.

Badoglio, in his memoirs,[86] wrote that on May 26, the “Duce”—with Balbo also present—told him that the day before he had sent “by courier a written statement of mine to Hitler to assure him that I do not intend to stand idly by and that, starting on June 5, I will be ready to declare war on England.” However, this account is entirely unreliable. First of all, Badoglio refers to a “routine” meeting, and while it is possible that an extraordinary meeting might not appear in the meeting schedules of Mussolini’s Private Secretariat, it is impossible for a routine one not to be recorded—just as, in fact, no meeting with Badoglio is listed under the date of May 26. Furthermore, Badoglio says he went to see Ciano immediately after the announcement “to find out if he had any more precise information to give me” (finding him completely in the dark), but there is no mention of this in Ciano’s diary. Nor is there any mention of Balbo’s presence in Rome on that day or, of course, of any audience he may have had at Palazzo Venezia. But the most important fact is that the “written declaration” to Hitler—in which Mussolini informed him of his decision to enter the war—was communicated in code to Alfieri, so that he could deliver it personally, only on May 30.[87] In reality, Badoglio learned of Mussolini’s decision between 6:30 and 7:00 p.m. on May 28, during an audience at Palazzo Venezia, in the course of which the “Duce” also read him the letter that Hitler had written to him on the 25th and that he had received the following day—and which, therefore, must have unfolded quite differently from what the marshal attributed to the nonexistent audience on the 26th”; a fact that leads one to believe that, in writing his memoirs, Badoglio did not confuse the date but deliberately distorted the entire episode.”

On May 26, Mussolini had received the letter written to him the day before by Hitler and, at the same time, the report sent to Rome by Alfieri regarding his meeting with Göring on the 22nd. Both must have made a strong impression on him, so much so that Ciano, after reporting on the two matters, noted: “He intends to write a letter to Hitler announcing his intervention for the second ten-day period of June”90. But, in fact, he had not yet truly decided. He made the actual decision on May 28, probably in the morning.

In his diary, Ciano attributes his father-in-law’s decision to “speed up the process, since he is convinced that everything is now coming to a head and he wants to establish his credentials to participate in the succession” to the capitulation of Belgium—news of which had arrived during the night—and, above all, to the course of the meeting that he, Ciano, had had on the 27th with François-Poncet.91 In reality, on the 27th, Ciano had had two meetings that may have influenced Mussolini. In addition to the French ambassador, he had also spoken with the U.S. ambassador, and the importance of this second meeting is indirectly demonstrated by the fact that Ciano took minutes of it. Here is how he reported it in his diary92:

88 The detail regarding the reading of Hitler’s letter is found in the minutes of the May 29 meeting between the military leaders and Mussolini. See DDI, vol. IX, IV, p. 495. Badoglio, who quotes part of these minutes in his book, notes at this point: “It was the reply to Mussolini’s letter regarding Italy’s entry into the war” (p. 40, note). This annotation confirms his falsehood: Hitler, in fact, replied to Mussolini on May 31.

89 It is significant that no meeting between Badoglio and Ciano is recorded even under the date of May 28.

92 Ibid., pp. 434 ff. There is perhaps a reference to the meeting in A. François-Poncet, *Au Palais Farnese*, op. cit., p. 173. For the meeting with Phillips, see *L’Europa verso la catastrofe*, op. cit., pp. 537 ff. Roosevelt’s proposal was that Mussolini inform him of “Italy’s desires and aspirations.” He would then bring them to the attention of Paris and London. “Should an agreement not be reached on the basis of these proposals, President Roosevelt would have requested that France and Great Britain commit to maintaining these conditions at the end of the war, as well as guaranteeing Italy’s participation in the Peace Conference on an equal footing with the belligerents. Mussolini, for his part, would have had to guarantee that he would not subsequently increase his demands and that he would maintain neutrality for the entire duration of the conflict.” For Phillips’s account, see FRUSt 1940, II, pp. 712 ff., as well as, for the text of Roosevelt’s message, pp. 710 ff.; and also W. Phillips, *Ventures in Diplomacy*, op. cit., pp. 274 ff. Phillips’s account shows that the entire second part of Ciano’s paragraph concerning his conversation with Phillips (from “My Reply to Phillips”) is a comment for the diary.

Extensive discussions with François Poncet and with Phillips. The latter is the bearer of a message from Roosevelt for the Duce, but he is not received and speaks with me instead. I recorded the conversation. In short, Roosevelt offers to act as a mediator between us and the Allies, taking personal responsibility for the implementation, once the war is over, of any agreements reached. I reply to Phillips that Roosevelt is off the mark. It will take more than that to dissuade Mussolini. After all, it’s not that he wants to obtain this or that: he wants war. If he could peacefully obtain even twice what he is demanding, he would refuse it.

The conversation with François Poncet was also significant, not for its results but as a psychological

indicator. He made some very specific overtures to me. Excluding Corsica—"which is an integral part of France"—he said that negotiations could take place regarding Tunisia, and perhaps even Algeria. I replied to him, as I did to Phillips: too late, and I reminded him of when France, in 1938, even contested those four rocks in the Red Sea that England had ceded to us. Once again, the French had been, as Machiavelli says, "more miserly than prudent."

Poncet acknowledged France's faults, attacked past governments, and placed much of the blame on Leger, whom he described as a "sinister man." The conversation, of course, remained in an academic tone.

These two exchanges stemmed from a heated and dramatic discussion* that had taken place in the preceding days in Paris, then spread to London and also involved Washington, and which—as we shall see—would continue even afterward.93 Despite the failure of Roosevelt's and Churchill's démarches on May 14 and 16, faced with the deteriorating military situation, Paris was not prepared to give up entirely on the hope of reaching some last-minute agreement with Mussolini. This was all the more so because, while the British ambassador in Rome, Loraine, was certain that Mussolini was now completely "in Germany's clutches" and that Italy's intervention—though not imminent (on May 18, Loraine had predicted it would not occur for about ten days)—was a foregone conclusion, François-Poncet, on the other hand, still harbored a glimmer of hope and bombarded the Quai d'Orsay and Reynaud with exhortations not to leave any stone unturned and to make "precise" offers to the "Duce" regarding the status of Gibraltar, Malta, Suez, Djibouti, and Tunisia. In his view as well, Mussolini was "in principle" determined to enter the war, but it was possible that he had not yet entirely abandoned the idea of playing the role of "peacemaker"—that is, that he was considering either "presenting to France, on Hitler's behalf, proposals for a separate peace under the threat of siding with Berlin" or attempting something else to achieve a general peace. It was therefore necessary to consider the possibility that, "if he were to receive concessions in the Mediterranean," the "Duce" might act as a moderator on Hitler's behalf. As for possible intermediaries, François-Poncet ruled out Generalissimo Franco, because he lacked authority, and considered the Pope "better positioned" than Roosevelt. Based in part on these suggestions, on May 25 Reynaud had brought the matter before the War Committee, and the following morning he flew to London to discuss it with Churchill and British policy makers, given that, moreover, some of the potential offers to be made to Italy directly concerned England. Halifax had proved the most receptive; he had also informed Reynaud that he had approached Bastianini the previous day to convey to him—as he put it—that the Allies were willing to consider proposals for negotiations regarding Italian interests and a just and lasting peace.[94] The others, however—and especially Churchill—had shown themselves to be reluctant or opposed to making concessions (upon his return to Paris, Reynaud received a telegram from the prime minister that very evening in which the latter stated he was "convinced that our security rests solely on our ability to fight") and, in any case, unwilling to make any decision before consulting the cabinet, so that, in the end, no further progress had been made—for the time being—beyond a new urgent request to Roosevelt to attempt yet another, more or less exploratory step.[95]

This, then, was the background to the move made on the 27th by Ambassador Phillips on behalf of the President of the United States toward Ciano. Less clear is the origin of the other move, that of François-Poncet. According to Reynaud's account, confirmed by Charles-Roux (who on May 18 had been appointed Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay to replace Léger)%, the question of whether to address Rome directly without making the move contingent on British "correlative offers" and—as François-Poncet suggested—making precise proposals for "massive African concessions" was

discussed by the French Council of Ministers on the night of May 27–28, after learning of Ciano's negative response to Roosevelt and reeling from the news of the Belgian capitulation. The meeting took place in a highly dramatic atmosphere, exacerbated by news from the front and by a whole series of reports on the Italian situation that were inaccurate or even completely baseless. Consider that Daladier (who served as foreign minister in the cabinet) went so far as to claim that half of Mussolini's personal guard was made up of Nazis, and Ybarnegaray claimed that the elite of the German troops was in San Remo disguised as tourists.

According to Daladier, it was necessary to take the risk of a unilateral move on Rome, offering Mussolini French Somalia and Djibouti, adjustments to the Libyan border, and a sort of joint administration over Tunisia. If the offers were rejected, the Italians would no longer be able to claim that Paris had remained vague; and, above all, by providing concrete arguments to the opponents of the war in Italy, they would likely have delayed intervention by one or two precious months. Reynaud declared himself opposed to sacrificing "French territory" such as Tunisia and doubtful that a move in which England did not also participate could be effective. Others, more "realistic," such as Ybarnegaray, argued that every effort should be made to prevent Italian intervention: if Mussolini was determined, he certainly would not be dissuaded by Somalia "and other nonsense"; if the price had to be Tunisia, well, it had to be paid. Still others were primarily concerned with the repercussions that such a move would have on French public opinion and morale. In the end, no decision was reached. Nevertheless, once the session was adjourned, Daladier drafted a telegram to the ambassadors in Rome and London that sought to take into account the various positions that had emerged. Here is the text:98

After examining the situation resulting from the defection of the King of the Belgians, the government, having deemed it essential to attempt—even at the cost of considerable sacrifices—to dissuade Italy from entering the war, has decided to submit the following proposals to Italy for this purpose:

a) cession of the French Somali Coast, as well as the operation of the Addis Ababa railway, subject to a right—if not an area—of call at the port of Djibouti;

b) , a rectification of the Franco-Libyan border with regard to both the section provided for in the agreements of January 7, 1935, and the line between Tummo and Ghadames;

c) territorial cession of a very large area between the Libyan hinterland and the Congolese coast.

Should this last concession prove insufficient to ensure the success of the negotiations, we would be prepared to replace it, in exchange, with a proposal to reform Tunisia's status, with a view to ensuring trusting cooperation between Italy and France in the French Protectorate of the Regency.

An effective way to resolve these issues could be to convene a conference on Mediterranean affairs.

That morning, Reynaud—apparently due mainly to resistance from Charles-Roux—did not feel comfortable giving the go-ahead for the operation. Instead of being sent to Rome and copied to London, the telegram was sent only to London for an opinion." Churchill's response was immediate and entirely negative. According to what the Prime Minister wrote to Reynaud that same day, the only way to improve the situation was to have faith and fight, thereby earning the admiration of the Americans and
possibly their material aid: "If we resist, all of us together, we can spare ourselves the fate of Denmark and Poland." As for the proposal sent to him, his response was equally clear:

In the formula prepared last Sunday by Lord Halifax, it was suggested that, if Mr. Mussolini cooperates with us toward establishing a settlement of all European issues that safeguards our independence and forms the basis of a just and lasting peace for Europe, we will be willing to discuss his claims in the Mediterranean. You are now proposing to add certain specific offers—which I cannot imagine have any chance of swaying Mr. Mussolini and which, once made, cannot be withdrawn—with a view to committing him to assuming the role of mediator envisaged in the proposal discussed on Sunday.

My colleagues and I believe that Mr. Mussolini has long harbored the intention of possibly playing this role, undoubtedly counting on deriving substantial benefits for Italy from it. But we are convinced that at this moment, when Mr. Hitler is elated by his victory and certainly counting on the imminent and complete end of Allied resistance, it will be impossible for Mr. Mussolini to put forward proposals for a conference with any chance of success. I would also remind you that the President of the United States of America received a completely negative response to the proposal that we jointly asked him to present, and that no response was given to the overtures made by Lord Halifax last Saturday to the Italian ambassador in London.

It is for this reason—without ruling out the possibility of engaging Mr. Mussolini at another time—that we cannot consider the present moment to be opportune, and I must add that, in my view, the effect on the morale of our people, who are today steadfast and resolute, would be extremely damaging. You yourself are best placed to judge what the effect would be in France.

The British refusal caused the Quai d'Orsay to desist from sending to Rome the telegram prepared during the night.[101] This did not, however, put an end to the pressure from those who wanted to make an attempt at any cost. On the evening of the 29th, Minister of Public Works De Monzie and Deputy Prime Minister Chautemps prepared a new draft proposal that was approved by Daladier, but Reynaud insisted it be submitted to the British ambassador, who initially refused to approve it; however, after consulting with London and obtaining some amendments, he ultimately agreed to let it pass,02. At 8:00 p.m. on May 30, Guariglia was summoned to the Quai d'Orsay, where Daladier handed him the following note:103

The French Government entrusts the Italian Ambassador with the task of conveying to the Head of the Italian Government the solemn communication dictated by his historical duties and the will of the French nation.

We can no longer ignore that a threat of conflict hangs over Franco-Italian relations. This threat is not a consequence of the war whose risk we have borne since September 1939, since from that very date Italy has not joined its forces with those of Germany. Furthermore, on every occasion, Mr. Mussolini has proclaimed that Italy would be concerned solely with serving its own destiny once it had defined its objectives and made its intentions clear.

This is therefore an Italian claim that, before being expressed in writing, would translate into action and would have the effect of leading our two peoples toward what the French people have always considered an impossible war. At this preliminary stage, and faced with a prospect that is terrifying to our consciences, we wish to declare:

that there is no incompatibility between France and Italy arising from the differences in the internal political systems of the two countries;

that we are willing to consider all measures capable of strengthening and ensuring the permanence of

this mutual independence of the two countries;

that we are equally prepared to examine, as of now, the full range of Mediterranean issues relevant to Italy's development;

that in the course of these negotiations for general purposes, France—determined not to renounce either its alliance or its commitments—would welcome all solutions conducive to the establishment of a new framework for Mediterranean cooperation;

that, with the aim of reaching not a temporary and precarious arrangement but a definitive security agreement, we wish to resort to direct negotiations among the parties concerned.

There is still time to avert the worst between us—namely, the abolition of our shared past and the ruin of our common civilization. Our outreach to Italy could not be interpreted as a sign of weakness at a time when our patriotism unites the unanimous passions and energies of the nation. It simply aims to underscore that we would have accepted and sought everything that could bring together and safeguard the interests of our homelands.

The note was certainly forceful and, given the circumstances, dignified, but—contrary to what François-Poncet had advised and to the draft telegram of two days earlier—it did not, as can be seen, contain any specific offer. Guariglia (to whom De Monzie had let it be known a few hours earlier that concrete offers were being prepared104) immediately pointed this out to Daladier and, two hours later, to De Monzie, eliciting this awkward response from the former: "We did not want to give the impression of haggling," and from the latter, reassurance that concrete proposals had already been considered and would be put forward if Italy agreed to embark on the path of negotiations. Daladier also told him what changes the British had wanted made to the text of the motion: "would welcome all useful solutions" instead of "would support," and the deletion of a passage recalling Mussolini's proposal of September 1, 1939, to convene a conference to avoid war: "the British wanted that phrase deleted, fearing it might be interpreted as an allusion to the possibility of convening a four-party conference with Germany even today, and thus as a French suggestion for peace,"05. The next day, Guariglia—for even among the Italians there were those clinging to every shred of hope106—tried in vain to urge Charles-Roux to take a further step: "The situation is evolving rapidly. Won't you do anything to hold Italy back?" But he received only this reply: "But that is the purpose of the note that was delivered to you yesterday." To which he could only respond: "But the note is not at all what I expected"...

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On the very same day that the French note was delivered to Guariglia, Roosevelt (whom Paris and London kept fully informed) had sent another message to Mussolini. It stated that an extension of the conflict to the Mediterranean, in addition to adversely affecting American public opinion, would result in further expansion of the United States' rearmament program and a redoubling of its commitment to ensuring that the Allies received whatever supplies they might need.[108] Mussolini's reply was curt: Ciano informed Ambassador Phillips that, in Italy's view, the United States had no more interests in the Mediterranean than Italy had in the Caribbean Sea, and that the decision to enter the war had already been made1W. It was noon

106 A whole series of personal initiatives taken by Italians in the final days of "non-belligerence" in

Paris (see P. Reynaud, *La France a sauvé l'Europe*, op. cit., pp. 223 ff.) and especially in London (see R. Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*, op. cit., pp. 613 ff.) should be viewed in this light. On the French side, a final "sounding" was made with Guariglia by Baudouin, who had just become foreign minister, on June 8. See DDI, vol. IX, IV, pp. 605 ff. On the night of June 1–2, the new French ambassador to the Holy See, d'Ormesson, had already taken a step to try to secure "a supreme effort" on the part of the Pope. See P. Reynaud, *La France a sauvé l'Europe*, op. cit., p. 223; ADSS, I, p. 481.

and at 3:15 p.m. on June 1. By that time, Mussolini—as we shall see shortly—had already decided to intervene and had already communicated this decision to Hitler. Likewise, by the time the French note of May 30 arrived in Rome—which Ciano had judged to contain "no specific proposal, but many overtures"—the decision had already been made; Mussolini had refused to consider it and had even decided not to reply to it. Nor, at that point, could it have been otherwise.

In light of what has been said so far regarding the French attempts at an agreement, the issue is rather a different one and concerns the conversation Ciano had on May 27 with François-Poncet. On that day, as we have seen, no decision had yet been made in Paris; yet, as we have also seen, according to Ciano, the French ambassador had made "very specific overtures" to him, even speaking of possible negotiations regarding Tunisia and, at most, even Algeria. This is undoubtedly perplexing, all the more so since there is no evidence that Paris ever considered the possibility of putting Algeria on the negotiating table, and the prospect of sacrificing Tunisia met with such resistance that most, as is clearly evident from the proposal contained in the telegram drafted on the night of May 27–28 and subsequently never sent, were instead quite willing to make major concessions in southwestern Libya all the way to the Atlantic. Of course, one might consider this an unreliable note by Ciano (which would certainly not be the only one), especially since the phrase attributed by Ciano to François-Poncet appears to have been used the following day by the foreign minister in a conversation with Loraine to say that Mussolini would not have changed his mind even if he had been offered Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco,[111] and there are numerous instances in which he habitually attributed his own statements or quips to others in his diary. What makes this hypothesis difficult to accept, however, is the fact that on the morning of May 26, François-Poncet told Pius XII that France was willing to make "generous concessions" to Italy—so much so that the idea of a letter from the Pope to Mussolini was floated (an idea that the British ambassador found "rather reserved and displeased," as he was concerned that it would end up "signing a blank check and causing Italian demands to grow out of proportion")112, and also prompted the Romanian ambassador—who likewise emphasized the "sacrifices" France was prepared to make to keep Mussolini in good spirits—to urge the Pope to take action. Encouraged by Welles, in early June he considered sending Mussolini yet another message, drawing inspiration from the French note of May 30. The message was in fact drafted, but on June 7, Hull succeeded in preventing its dispatch. Its only result, he said, would have been to be insulted once again by Mussolini. See C. Hull, *Memoirs of Peace and War*, op. cit., I, pp. 307 ff.

remain outside the conflict.[113] Thus—based on the available documentation—it seems more likely to us that Ciano's note is essentially accurate and that François-Poncet (who, moreover, was pressing Paris in every way to make concrete offers) had acted on his own initiative, putting an end to the delays and anticipating what he believed would ultimately be the instructions from the Quai d'Orsay.

At first glance, this may seem of little interest or significant only for the purposes of a more complete reconstruction of French maneuvers. To us, however, it seems of great interest in explaining how Mussolini came to decide on intervention on May 28. Undoubtedly, various motives—and certainly not all of them rational—contributed to his decision: what we have said so far seems to us to demonstrate

this abundantly. However, in our view, four reasons were decisive. First of all, the increasingly clear signs of the Allied defeat in France: although he had not anticipated at all that the French collapse would come so quickly, Mussolini could no longer wait if he did not want to run the risk of arriving "too late" and making a fool of himself. Then there was his fear of the Germans, which was growing ever stronger. A fear that Alfieri's report on his conversation with Göring must have intensified to the point of prompting him to say: "We cannot back down. After France, our turn might come one day: and it would be the height of irony to have signed a pact called the 'Pact of Steel,' only to be invaded by Germany—that is, to find ourselves on the anvil's side" "4; a fear that must have somehow leaked out to the diplomatic corps accredited in Rome and at the Vatican[115] and that was spreading among more than a few of those who were well acquainted with the secret history of relations between Rome and Berlin in recent months, if even Attolico had for some time made no secret of his concern that the Germans might make Italy "pay dearly" for its hesitations *". And, alongside these two underlying reasons, there was the outcome of the two meetings Ciano had held on May 27 with the U.S. and French ambassadors. From the first, Mussolini had to conclude that if Roosevelt was so insistently committed to keeping Italy out of the conflict—even at the cost of making France and England pay a high price to achieve it and of putting his own reputation on the line—this could mean only two things: that Italian intervention would play a truly decisive role, and that the United States did not want to or could not enter the war. And from the second, he must have drawn, so to speak, the counter-evidence: if Paris was now willing to pay a higher price than it had always refused to pay up to that point, this could mean nothing other than that it was truly in dire straits...

This, it seems to us, can be concluded by reasoning based on the facts, the documents, and the reconstruction of Mussolini's state of mind that we have been gradually carrying out. If one abandons this solid ground and ventures onto the much more uncertain terrain of hypotheses, one might, however, ask a question—one devoid of historical value but of non-negligible significance for understanding Mussolini's position. Were Paris's intentions truly limited to what the available documentation suggests—namely, to prevent Italian military intervention—or did they in fact go further and aim to prompt a political move by Mussolini, a renewed proposal, at that stage of the conflict, for a conference among the belligerents to negotiate a peace that would undoubtedly have put Hitler in a difficult position? This leads to a second question. If these were Paris's true intentions (and for at least some members of the French government on May 27, they were) and if London—as we have seen—had not blocked the French moves that could have served as the starting point for the operation, how would Mussolini have behaved faced with such a possibility? Is it not possible to hypothesize that the "Duce" actually expected precisely this? We ask this question because, on the one hand, it is a fact that during the third decade of May, various rumors circulated in international diplomatic circles regarding Mussolini's possible intention to position himself once again as the "architect of peace" or as the initiator of a "final mediation" (either peace or I'll go to war), and, on the other hand, it is incomprehensible why Mussolini—if he had sought only to play a decisive role in the course of the conflict—once he had decided to intervene, reaffirmed his previous orders to remain on the ground and, essentially, to maintain a defensive posture in the air as well. The declaration of war, he told Badoglio, was intended only to transform "the de facto situation into a de jure one": "the armed forces, and especially the Army and the Air Force," were to be reserved "for future events"117. And it even seems he told him to issue orders not to fire: "We will leave it to others to take responsibility for attacking us." And he essentially did not change this order until June 15, when he ordered Badoglio to attack on the 18th across the entire Alpine front. Not to mention the highly unusual course of action of announcing as early as June 1 to Phillips—and then, in effect, also to François-Poncet and Loraine—that Italy would enter the war. Such behavior—even in light of Mussolini's convoluted psychology—is difficult, if not impossible, to explain by his awareness of military unpreparedness; rather, it suggests that he was waiting for something: perhaps that the announcement of his intervention would prompt

France and England to begin peace negotiations and that he—having brought the conflict to an end without firing a shot—could finally position himself as an impartial arbiter, even if allied with Germany, as he had done at Munich.

After Badoglio was informed of the decision late in the afternoon of May 28, Mussolini convened a meeting the following morning at Palazzo Venezia with the four leaders of the armed forces: Badoglio and the three chiefs of staff, Graziani, Cavagnari, and Pricolo. Within half an hour, everything was settled. Mussolini120 officially announced his decision and stated that he considered "every day from June 5 onward to be a good day to enter the war." After briefly summarizing the situation between the Germans and the Allies in France, he confirmed what he had written in his memorandum of March 31:

On the land front, we will not be able to achieve anything spectacular; we will remain on the defensive. Something may develop on the Eastern Front—the Yugoslavia scenario. Our forces will be directed toward England, that is, toward its naval positions and forces in port and at sea in the Mediterranean. As I predicted on May 26, 1939, there will be air and naval warfare along all frontiers.

Then, after a brief mention of the "situation of the Italian people"—regarding the situation of the Italian people, which must be taken into account—I say: until May 1, the Italian people feared going to war too soon and tended to dismiss this possibility. This is understandable. Now two sentiments are stirring the Italian people: first, the fear of arriving too late in a situation that would devalue our intervention; second, a certain urge to emulate others—to be able to parachute in, fire at tanks, and so on. This is something that pleases us because it demonstrates that the Italian people are made of strong stuff. He then moved on to the question of supreme command, treating it as already resolved according to his wishes, even though in reality Victor Emmanuel III had not yet formally entrusted it to him.

Having made this preamble," he said, "the High Command is established as of today; it will be made public 'de jure' when His Majesty the King gives me the document entrusting me with command of the Armed Forces.

My Chief of Staff is Marshal Badoglio. I will issue directives to him, which will be implemented on the ground through the three Chiefs of Staff of the Army, Navy, and Air Force.

That settles the matter...

I would add that the High Command will have only operational functions; it will be reduced to the essentials; we must not create "second-tier" ministries. The High Command consists of a group of men with operational duties; the rest of the administration does not concern these men, who are tasked with directing the armed forces.

No one raised any objections; the very brief discussion that followed the "Duce's" remarks was limited to a few purely technical aspects concerning the organization of the command structure. Nor did any real objections (except for Badoglio's stated intention to ask Mussolini to "postpone the date of the intervention a little" "to allow a little more time" for preparations121) emerge from the meeting that Badoglio held the following day with Soddu, Graziani, Cavagnari, and Pricolo,22. From May 30 to June 10, Mussolini received Badoglio every day (almost always at 11:00 a.m.), sometimes briefly, sometimes at length; on May 31, he received him twice—in the morning alone for twenty minutes, and in the afternoon with Balbo, Teruzzi, and Pricolo; however, we lack any information regarding all these meetings,123 except, as mentioned, for the one on June 6, during which Mussolini told the Chief of the General Staff to issue an order not to fire.

Having informed the heads of the armed forces, but without even formally presenting his decision to the Grand Council, much less to the Council of Ministers (on June 4, when the latter met, he merely said: “This is our last meeting in peacetime,” and, to use Ciano’s words, he had “the audacity” to give the meeting a strictly administrative character ’24), on May 30 Mussolini finally decided to take the truly decisive step: he informed Hitler of his decision. The die was cast. Two days later, Ciano submitted the text of the declaration of war to the king, and Victor Emmanuel III approved it. This

121 The request was made in writing by Badoglio on June 1. His letter to Mussolini, written for this purpose, concluded as follows: “In my opinion, we must strive, at all costs, to buy us the entire month of June. This will also allow us to gauge the pace of the Germans’ successes in France.” See DDI, vol. IX, IV, pp. 536 ff. On June 2, Balbo also asked Mussolini to postpone intervention until the end of the month. Cf. F. Rossi, *Mussolini e lo Stato Maggiore*, op. cit., p. 18.

The text of the letter written by Mussolini to Hitler—which, having been transmitted in code, Alfieri was ordered to deliver personally to the Führer[125]:

Führer,

Once again, I cordially thank you for the message you sent me, in which I found the information regarding the valor of the soldiers of the various armies to be most interesting.

In the meantime, I have received news of Belgium’s capitulation, and I send you my congratulations.

I have delayed my reply by a few days because I wanted to inform You of my decision to enter the war on June 5.

If you believe that, for better coordination with your plans, I should delay a few more days, please let me know; but by now the Italian people are eager to stand alongside the German people in the fight against our common enemies.

Over the past nine months, the effort made in military preparations has been truly considerable.

Today, approximately 70 divisions are in good operational condition, 12 of which are stationed overseas (Libya, 220,000 men; Albania, 100,000).

Italian East Africa has 350,000 men, including Italians and locals, who are not included in this tally.

As I have already told you, the navy and air force are already on a war footing.

I will assume command of all the armed forces.

If I had the resources, I could form another 70 divisions, because there is no shortage of men in Italy.

From a political standpoint, I believe it is necessary not to extend the conflict to the Danube and Balkan regions, from which Italy must also obtain the supplies that will no longer come from beyond Gibraltar.

I believe that a statement to that effect—which I will make at the appropriate time—would have a calming effect on those peoples and would make them completely resistant to any attempts by the

Allies.

Once this is established, our General Staffs will take the necessary measures regarding the conduct of operations.

Pending your reply, please accept, Führer, the expressions of my comradely friendship.

The report in which Alfieri conveyed to Ciano the reactions of Hitler and von Ribbentrop when they learned (on the morning of the 31st in Godesberg) of the contents of the letter[126] is particularly interesting because it makes it clear that, right up to the end, the Germans had feared that Mussolini, instead of intervening in the conflict against France and England, might take advantage of the situation to attack Yugoslavia. As Hitler told Alfieri (though it is difficult to believe that this was Berlin's only real concern, especially in light of the passivity with which, just a few weeks later, it accepted the Soviet occupation not only of Bessarabia—as provided for in the agreements of August 23, 1939—but also of northern Bukovina, which was not covered by those agreements), an Italian action in the Balkans would in fact have provided the USSR with a pretext to intervene in the region in turn, citing the disruption of the regional balance of power. This may well have been true, but it certainly also demonstrates the uncertainty and distrust—not entirely unjustified, in reality—with which the Germans had thus far viewed Italian moves. Equally significant is the fact that Hitler—aside from a few perfunctory remarks—did not entrust Alfieri with any message to convey to the "Duce," and when explicitly asked by the Italian ambassador whether the planned date for the intervention was to his liking, he replied that he would first have to consult his generals and that he would write directly to Mussolini on the matter.

The reply was delivered to Mussolini by von Mackensen the following day 127. Stripped of the pleasantries, the updates on the progress of military operations, and, at the end, a vague proposal for a meeting, there were two important points. In one, Hitler reiterated his full agreement "that it is desirable for us to keep the Balkans and the Danube basin as far away from the conflict as possible" and—a truly significant point that shows how the Germans' mistrust had not yet subsided—he reminded Mussolini of this and urged him to issue a public statement on the matter. In the other, he asked to postpone the date of the intervention by a few days.

This—Hitler wrote—would have the following advantage: our air force has been able to identify the new makeshift French airfields fairly accurately and determine their strength. Our aircraft, in conjunction with the other measures taken, will attack these French air bases in the coming days and destroy them, if possible, completely. If, on the other hand, France—due to the Italian action that has already begun or out of fear of the military action we are waging against it—were to decide at the last moment to move its air forces to safety, this would undermine the effectiveness of our action without you, Duce, being able to immediately ascertain the locations of the new makeshift airfields where the remnants of the French air force might still take refuge, at least in part. I hope, however, to put the French air force out of action over the course of the coming weeks. But if the enemy aircraft disappear, extensive searches will be necessary to track down their hiding places.

These are the reasons why I would like to ask you to consider whether it seems possible to postpone your entry into the war until toward the end of next week, that is, around June 6 or 8. The 7th would also be fine, but it is a Friday, a day that many (among the German people there is such a belief) may not consider suitable for a fortunate start. In any case, whatever you decide is fine, Duce, since the mere fact of your entry into the war will cause a moment of enormous dismay on our enemy's front.

From Ciano's diary128 we know that, despite his "haste," Mussolini had no difficulty accepting Hitler's request, "also because the delay suits us in order to finalize preparations in Libya: rather than the 8th, he favors June 1, 'a fateful date for him.'" And he never deviated from this date. On June 2, von Mackensen informed Mussolini that the request to postpone the date of June 5 had been withdrawn and, indeed, an earlier date would be welcome, but he received a negative response: technical reasons —namely, certain ongoing troop movements—made it unacceptable 129. That same day, the "Duce" telegraphed Hitler his reply to the letter received three days earlier130:

Führer,

I cordially thank you for the message you sent me in response to mine, which was delivered to you by Ambassador Alfieri. The victorious conclusion of the gigantic Battle of Flanders has aroused, along with my own, the enthusiasm of the entire Italian people. Regarding the date of Italy's entry into the war, I am fully aware of the advisability of postponing it to allow your air force to identify and destroy the French air forces. This brief delay also allows me to finalize my preparations in all sectors, both in the homeland and overseas. My plan is as follows: on Monday, June 10, a declaration of war and an address to the Italian people; and on the morning of the 11th, the start of hostilities. As for our meeting, I thank you for proposing it, but I believe it would be more appropriate for it to take place after Italy enters the war. In the speech I will deliver a few hours after the declaration of war, I will state that Italy, in accordance with its policy, does not intend to expand the scope of the war, and I will mention the Danube-Balkan countries, including Greece and Turkey. I now wish to express my desire to see at least a contingent of the Italian army fight alongside your soldiers to seal, on the battlefield, the brotherhood in arms and the camaraderie of our Revolutions. If you accept this offer of mine, I will immediately send you several regiments of Bersaglieri, who are valiant and resilient soldiers.

I send you my warmest regards along with my most fervent wishes for the future success of your armed forces.

As for the decision regarding intervention, this telegram effectively brought the chapter of contacts with the Germans to a close. From what we have said, however, two facts emerge that it may not be entirely useless to dwell on for a moment. One is von Mackensen's request, on June 2, to consider null and void the request made three days earlier to postpone the date of intervention and, indeed, if possible, to bring it forward. Whatever the reasons behind Hitler's first request, the second one makes it clear that the Germans considered an active Italian contribution to the campaign in France to be useful. This makes Mussolini's June 6 order to Badoglio to remain strictly on the defensive even more incomprehensible and, in a sense, confirms the hypothesis we put forward in the preceding pages. Another piece of evidence is the "program" communicated to Hitler in Mussolini's telegram of June 2. It shows that the "Duce" had already decided by that date to address "the Italian people" on June 10, after the declaration of war had been delivered to the British and French ambassadors. However, documents from Mussolini's Secretariat show that it was not until June 9 that plans were made for the "Duce" to deliver his speech on the afternoon of the following day.[131] Through June 8, if not even until a certain time on the 9th, when the audiences were canceled, according to the Secretariat, on the afternoon of June 10, Mussolini was scheduled to receive Engineer Ambrosini at 5:00 p.m. and the officials from the Ministry of Aeronautics at 5:30 p.m.132 Should this fact, too, be attributed to the aforementioned hypothesis?

On other political fronts as well, the last week of peace was virtually uneventful. The only area of significant activity was that of the "moral preparation" of the Italian people. The language of the press and radio became more explicit with each passing day. With all caution now cast aside, it was no longer

a secret that the country was on the “eve” of intervention,133 and every effort was made to emphasize that, under the leadership of the “Duce,”134 the war would take on an entirely new character. As Pavolini wrote in an article titled “Mussolinian War,” which appeared in nearly all newspapers on June 5, it would be a “dynamic, rapid, qualitative war,” quite different from those of the past.

131 Abroad, the declaration of war and Mussolini’s speech had been anticipated for several days. The Reuters News Agency had announced them for June 6. On June 7, the Foreign Office had summoned the counselor at the Italian embassy “to discuss the arrangements for the repatriation of the Italian diplomatic mission in the event of a conflict” (ASAE, Incoming Telegrams, 1940, Series P. R., Vol. 292). In Italy, the announcement that Mussolini would address the Italian people was made on June 10 itself via radio and through posters and banners put up at the last minute.

133 For a summary of the most frequently recurring topics, see xxx, “Vigilia,” in *Relazioni internazionali*, June 8, 1940, p. 781. After emphasizing the eighteen years of Fascist peace policy and the responsibility of France and England for having caused its failure and for creating the situation that had first led to war with Germany and was now leading to Italian intervention, the article concluded as follows: “All the wars the Italian people have waged have been wars of independence. This new war effort that the Italian people are about to undertake is nothing less than the supreme war of independence. Today, more than ever, the motto of the unknown soldier of the Piave returns: ‘Better to live one day as a lion than a hundred as a sheep.’”

134 The fact that the “Duce” would “lead” the armed forces was mentioned several times. The regime’s propaganda apparatus, however, would make its greatest effort in this regard on June 11. The day before, in his briefing to journalists, Pavolini spoke on this matter in the following terms: “Tomorrow the newspapers must report on the formation of the Italian High Command. There will be the document by which the King-Emperor delegates to the Duce the sole and supreme command of the armed forces during the war, and there will also be details regarding the composition of the General Staff under the Duce’s command and the sector commanders of the army and air force. This news should be commented on not only based on what your own instincts suggest, but also according to a guideline I am providing, which includes a comparison of how this matter is handled in France and Germany, clarifies the principles underpinning the Italian system, and contains a few other clarifications. Please do not transcribe it verbatim, as that would make it sound like a chorus; therefore, I am providing it for you to paraphrase.” v

As for the general approach to the commentary, here are the instructions given by Pavolini: “Regarding the approach to be taken by the newspapers—both in the news section and in the paper as a whole—the first recommendation is not to underestimate the enemy. Undervalue them morally and politically, but not militarily. First of all, because underestimating the enemy would not reflect the reality of the situation; second, because it would mean underestimating the Italian intervention. Now, the truth is that the intervention was decided upon and communicated to the Allies when the outcome of the battle underway in the West was more than uncertain—indeed, it had not even begun yet. The forces we are facing in the Mediterranean are virtually intact from a naval standpoint, because the fleet has remained in position on the part of both England and France. Likewise, the ground forces in the Mediterranean have remained in position. The same applies to the air forces. Therefore, the obstacle we intend to face and overcome is by no means negligible from a military standpoint. It is therefore appropriate that this sentiment exists. We all hope that the war will be swift and victorious, but it is important that this be evident from the facts. Therefore, we must not give in to excessive optimism at the outset.

It was in this atmosphere that June 10 arrived. At 4:30 p.m., Ciano summoned the French and British

ambassadors to Palazzo Chigi. Dressed in an Air Force officer's uniform, he delivered the declaration of war to them, first to François-Poncet, then to Loraine. In his diary, he recorded the "ceremony" as follows: 135:

"First, I received Poncet, who was trying not to betray his emotion. I said to him, 'You have probably already understood the reasons for my summons.' He replied, 'Although I am not very intelligent, this time I have understood.' But he smiled for only an instant. After hearing the declaration of war, he replied, 'It is a dagger thrust at a man lying on the ground. I thank you, however, for using a velvet glove." He went on to say that he had foreseen all this two years ago and had no longer hoped to avoid it after the signing of the Pact of Steel. He could not bring himself to regard me as an enemy, nor could he regard any Italian as such. However, since a formula for European coexistence would have to be found in the future, he hoped that an unbridgeable rift would not be created between Italy and France. "The Germans are harsh masters. You'll find that out for yourselves, too." I never replied. It didn't seem like the right moment to argue. "Don't get yourself killed," he concluded, gesturing toward my air force uniform, and shook my hand.

François-Poncet, in his memoirs,[36], recounted the scene as follows:

Ciano greeted me standing upright, in his air force officer's uniform. He seemed less at ease and more embarrassed than usual:

"From the Duce's speech itself, one can infer the directive—which, incidentally, had already been hinted at in a directive to the newspapers in recent days—not to meddle in the Balkans, including Turkey, nor in Egypt, Switzerland, or Russia; and as regards the United States and the Americas in general, to proceed according to whatever reactions may arise, but without us taking a confrontational stance toward those countries. The intervention does not put an end to the campaign explaining the reasons for the intervention itself; on the contrary, in a certain sense, it delves deeper into them. So far, we have explained (in recent months and weeks) the serious reasons for Italy's intervention. All of this must obviously be continued and explored in greater depth from the dual perspective of the Empire's independence—that is, Italy's maritime independence—from the plutocratic perspective, and from the perspective of what might be called a proletarian and working-class war against the democracies that seek to stifle the social forces of our country; and finally, from what I would call the irredentist perspective" (ACS, Ministry of Popular Culture, b. 75, file "Report to Journalists").

- "You know," he told me, "what this is about."

I replied that one doesn't need to be very intelligent to understand it:

- Your uniform speaks volumes. After all, you warned me well in advance of what was coming.

Ciano then served me, on behalf of his king, the declaration of war.

" " So," I said to him, "you waited until we were down to stab us in the back. If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't be proud of that!"

Ciano blushes:

- My dear Poncet, — he replies, — all this will be over soon enough. We'll be back around a green table before long.

“ ” “Provided,” I object, “that you aren't killed!”

I add that I'm curious to know the reasons why Italy is declaring war on us.

- “ ” “You know that just as well as I do,” retorts the minister. “It's because of the commitments we've made!”

- “ ” I tell him again, “I cannot bring myself to regard an Italian as an enemy. After the war, European life will resume. Those who allow a blood-soaked chasm to be dug between Italy and France will be greatly to blame.”

With these words, we parted, both equally moved. We were never to see each other again.

The meeting with Loraine137 was colder and more formal:

Sir Percy Loraine was more laconic and imperturbable. He received the communication without batting an eye or turning pale. He merely wrote down the exact wording I had used and asked whether he should consider it a warning or an outright declaration of war. Upon learning that it was the latter, he withdrew with dignity and courtesy. At the door, we exchanged a long and cordial handshake.

At 6:00 p.m., from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia, Mussolini announced the declaration of war to the Romans. The radio broadcast his speech throughout the country, and people were summoned to listen to it in the main squares and in front of the headquarters of the National Fascist Party (PNF). This is the text of his speech138:

Soldiers of the land, sea, and air! Black Shirts of the revolution and the legions! Men and women of Italy, the Empire, and the Kingdom of Albania! Listen!

A fateful hour is striking in the skies above our homeland. The hour of irrevocable decisions. The declaration of war has already been delivered to the ambassadors of Great Britain and France. Let us take the field against the plutocratic and reactionary democracies of the West, which, at all times, have hindered the march—and often threatened the very existence—of the Italian people.

Several decades of recent history can be summed up in these phrases: promises, threats, blackmail, and, finally, as the crowning touch, the ignoble collective siege by fifty-two states.

Our conscience is absolutely clear. Together with you, the entire world bears witness that the Italy of the Fasces did everything humanly possible to avert the storm that is ravaging Europe; but it was all in vain.

All that was needed was to revise the treaties to adapt them to the changing needs of nations and not regard them as inviolable for all eternity; all that was needed was to avoid embarking on the foolish policy of guarantees, which proved particularly deadly for those who accepted them; all that was needed was not to reject the proposal the Führer made on October 6 of last year, after the campaign in Poland had ended.

All of that is now a thing of the past. If we are determined today to face the risks and sacrifices of war, it is because honor, our interests, and our future imperatively demand it, for a great people is truly great only if it regards its commitments as sacred and does not shy away from the supreme trials that determine the course of history.

We take up arms to resolve—once the issue of our continental borders has been settled—the issue of our maritime borders; we wish to break the chains of territorial and military order that suffocate us in our own sea, for a people of forty-five million souls is not truly free unless it has free access to the ocean.

This colossal struggle is but a phase in the logical development of our revolution; it is the struggle of the poor and populous peoples against the exploiters who ferociously hold a monopoly on all the riches and all the gold of the earth; it is the struggle of the fertile and youthful peoples against the sterilized and declining peoples; it is the struggle between two centuries and two ideas.

Now that the die is cast and our resolve has burned our ships behind us, I solemnly declare that Italy does not intend to drag other neighboring peoples—whether by sea or by land—into the conflict. Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, and Egypt should take note of these words of mine, and it depends on them—and them alone—whether or not they will be strictly upheld.

Italians!

At a memorable gathering in Berlin, I said that, according to the laws of Fascist morality, when one has a friend, one marches with him to the very end.

This is what we have done and will continue to do with Germany, with its people, and with its marvelous Armed Forces.

On the eve of an event of historic significance, let us turn our thoughts to His Majesty the King-Emperor, who, as always, has embodied the spirit of the fatherland. And let us salute the Führer, the leader of our great ally Germany.

Italy—proletarian and fascist—stands tall for the third time, stronger, prouder, and more united than ever before. There is but one watchword, categorical and binding upon all. It soars and sets hearts ablaze from the Alps to the Indian Ocean: victory! And we shall triumph, to finally bring a long era of peace and justice to Italy, to Europe, and to the world.

People of Italy!

Take up arms, and demonstrate your tenacity, your courage, your valor!

In the next volume, we will examine the echoes and repercussions of the declaration of war within Italy, in Italian communities abroad, and in neutral countries. However, we cannot fail to mention here the two specific assessments that—not only then but even today—form the basis of the collective historical and moral judgment on Italy’s intervention—a judgment that time and the work of historians may modify but cannot erase or overturn—and which, in the final analysis, the fact that it has found such a vast echo in the collective consciousness of contemporaries signifies that at its core there is something that goes beyond the passions and polemical-propagandistic intentions of the moment—something that has its own objective validity, which can, indeed, be clarified and corrected from a more

strictly historical perspective, but not disregarded. The first of these two assessments is the one we saw immediately articulated by François-Poncet to Ciano and essentially foreseen and feared by Mussolini himself: a stab in the back of a country, France, already on the ground. An assessment so natural and spontaneous that it came to the lips not only of ordinary people but also of those who, for reasons of political expediency, would rationally have preferred to avoid it. On June 10, upon learning of Italy's declaration of war, both Reynaud and Roosevelt commented on it for their respective peoples. In the draft of the speech he had prepared himself—which the French Prime Minister was to deliver over the radio—the "stab in the back" did not appear. Speaking into the microphones, Reynaud impulsively replaced it with a bland "declare war" 139:

... it was at this very moment—when France, wounded but undaunted and still standing, is fighting against German hegemony and is thus fighting for the independence of all other peoples as well as its own—that Mr. Mussolini chose to stab us in the back. How are we to judge this act? France, for her part, has nothing to say. The world, which is watching us, will judge.

The same was true of Roosevelt's speech at the University of Charlottesville, with the sole difference that the phrase appeared in the draft prepared by the State Department. As Hull recounted in his memoirs, Volume 14, on the advice of Welles—who did not want to irritate Mussolini in view of his possible cooperation at the time of peace—Roosevelt had removed it, but then changed his mind.

"Today, June 10, 1940," he said in Charlottesville, "the hand that held the dagger has stabbed its neighbor in the back."

The second assessment is more political and concerns more directly the role played by Mussolini; as such, it is of even greater interest to us here. Nor, given what we have been saying throughout this volume, is it possible to dispute its fundamental truth, even if this—let us be clear—should not be understood as a way to erase other (and serious) individual and collective responsibilities. In contrast to that of

139 See P. Reynaud, *La France a sauvé l'Europe*, op. cit., p. 285. In the text published in *Relazioni internazionali*, June 15, 1940, p. 847, the phrase does not appear and is replaced by "to declare war on us."

141 For the full text of the speech, in which Roosevelt recalled the various stages of his mediation efforts, see "Relazioni internazionali," June 22, 1940, pp. 860 ff., which also quotes verbatim the passage on the "stab in the back."

As for François-Poncet, Reynaud, and Roosevelt, this second assessment was not made in the heat of the moment but several months later, in the context of an appeal to the Italian people broadcast by Radio London on December 23, 1940,[142] after Italy had suffered its first military setbacks in Africa and Greece:

A single man has led the Italian people into a life-and-death struggle against the British Empire and has deprived Italy of the friendship and sympathy of the United States of America. I will not deny that he is a great man; but no one can deny that, after eighteen years of unchecked power, he has led your country to the brink of the most dreadful ruin. He is a single man who, against the Crown and the Royal Family of Italy, against the Pope and the authority of the Vatican and the Catholic Church, and against the wishes of the Italian people—who do not want this war—has led the people, the custodians and heirs of ancient Rome, to fight alongside ferocious barbarians and pagans. This is the tragedy of Italian history

today, and this is the criminal who has woven this tale of madness and shame!

Appendix

Opinion of the President of the Council of State, Santi Romano, on the establishment of the first Marshalate of the Empire (1938)

COUNCIL OF STATE

The President

1.

No provision of law or regulation expressly provides for the possibility that the Chamber of Deputies may be convened on an emergency basis.

However, such a convening (meaning during the parliamentary session) must be considered permissible under the general principle—reaffirmed in numerous regulatory provisions—which grants the President of the Chamber of Deputies broad discretionary powers over all matters concerning the functioning of the Chamber itself.

11.

According to Article 55 of the Statute, “Every bill must first be examined by the committees appointed by each Chamber for the preparation of the work.” In turn, Article 46 of the Rules of Procedure of the Chamber of Deputies stipulates that a report must be submitted on every bill, to be printed and distributed twenty-four hours before the debate begins, unless the Chamber decides otherwise.

There is no doubt that not only Article 46 of the Rules of Procedure, but also Article 55 of the Statute itself, do not contain binding provisions whose observance is required for the constitutionality of the law.

These are provisions pertaining to the so-called interna corporis, which are internally exempt from any oversight other than that which is itself internal—that is, that of the President. This is universally acknowledged by legal scholarship[1] and stems from the prerogative granted by Article 61 of the Statute to each Chamber to freely determine the manner in which it is to exercise its functions; a prerogative that is exercised not only by enacting its own internal rules on this matter but also by assessing, on a case-by-case basis, the manner in which both these internal rules and the statutory and, more generally, legislative provisions have been observed with respect to a given law.

1 See, e.g., Racioppi and Brunelli, Commentary on the Statute of the Kingdom, Vol. III, para. 757, “Under our public law, [scrutiny of laws] must cease upon the proclamation of the final vote by the respective President of each of the two Chambers”; Romano, Course in Constitutional Law, 3rd ed., pp. 346 ff.

Note that this principle is not unique to Italian law but is enshrined in a general custom of parliamentary law, which has its roots in English law.

ni.

The creation of new military ranks falls within the purview of the Legislative Branch.

First of all, no matter is excluded from the jurisdiction of the legislative branch, not even when it concerns matters that may be the subject of regulations issued by the executive branch.

Second, the executive branch's authority to issue legal regulations in accordance with Law No. 100 of January 31, 1926, does not extend to the organization of the Army. The circular issued by His Excellency the Head of Government regarding the application of the aforementioned law states verbatim: "The regulatory power regarding the organization of the State applies solely to its administrative bodies; therefore, where the matter does not concern actual administrative organization but rather a fundamental institution of the State, such as the Army, the organization of that institution clearly falls outside the scope of regulation and falls exclusively within the legislative sphere."

Therefore, new military ranks not only can but must be established through formal laws.

IV.

Once the new military ranks have been established by law, they may be conferred upon individuals by Royal Decrees, since the King, as is well known, is the Head of the Army (Art. 5 of the Statute), and this royal prerogative—by general principle and established practice—includes the authority to appoint individuals to various military posts.

However, in this specific case, the intention was not only to positively authorize the conferral of the new ranks upon His Majesty the King and His Excellency the Head of Government, but also to exclude the possibility that these same ranks might be conferred upon other individuals.

Such an exclusion—that is, such a negative provision—necessarily had to be the subject of a formal law.

V.

The simultaneous conferral of the rank of First Marshal of the Empire upon the Head of State and the Head of Government is fully legitimate, even from a constitutional standpoint, for the obvious reason that such conferral does not derogate from the statutory provision whereby the King is the Supreme Commander of the Army.

Rome, April 2, 1938-xvi.

Signed: S. Romano

Art. 1.

The Chamber of Deputies is abolished at the end of the 29th Legislature. In its place, the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations is established.

Art. 2.

The Senate of the Kingdom and the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations shall collaborate with the Government in the enactment of laws.

Art. 3.

The Chamber of Fasci and Corporations is composed of the members of the National Council of the National Fascist Party and the members of the National Council of Corporations, subject to the incompatibilities set forth in Article 9.

Changes in the composition of the National Fascist Council and the National Council of Corporations shall be provided for by law.

Art. 4.

The Duce of Fascism, Head of the Government, is, by right, a member of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations.

The members of the Grand Council of Fascism are also members, subject to the incompatibilities set forth in Article 9.

Art. 5.

National Councilors who are members of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations must meet the requirements prescribed by Article 40 of the Statute of the Kingdom, but the minimum age limit is set at twenty-five years, to be reached by the day of the oath referred to in Article 6.

The status of National Councilor is conferred by decree of the Duce of Fascism, Head of Government, to be published in the “Official Gazette” of the Kingdom.

Art. 6.

Before being admitted to the exercise of their functions, National Councilors shall take an oath in plenary session, in accordance with the formula set forth in Article 49 of the Statute of the Kingdom.

Art. 7.

National Councilors shall enjoy the privileges already established for Deputies by the Statute of the Kingdom.

National Councilors are entitled to an annual allowance, the amount of which is determined by law.

Art. 8.

National Councilors shall cease to hold office upon ceasing to hold the office they exercised in the Councils that constitute the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations.

Art. 9.

No one may simultaneously serve as a National Councilor and as a Senator or Member of the Italian

Academy.

Art. 10.

The sessions of the Senate of the Kingdom and the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations are divided into legislative sessions.

The end of each legislative session is established by royal decree, upon the proposal of the Duce of Fascism, Head of Government. The decree also sets the date for the convening of the two legislative assemblies, which meet to hear the Speech from the Throne, marking the beginning of the next legislative session.

For the exercise of ordinary legislative functions, the two Assemblies are periodically convened by the Duce of Fascism, Head of Government.

Art. 11.

The President of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations is appointed by royal decree. The Vice Presidents are likewise appointed by royal decree.

The President of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations appoints the other officers established in the Chamber's Rules of Procedure.

Art. 12.

The Chamber of Fasci and Corporations exercises its functions through the Plenary Assembly, the General Budget Committee, and the Legislative Committees.

Special Committees may be established for specific matters.

Art. 13.

Legislative Committees are formed by the President of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations in connection with specific national activities. The President may convene them at any time.

The President also establishes and convenes the committees provided for in the second paragraph of Article 12.

Art. 14.

The President and, by delegation from the President, the Vice Presidents of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations may participate in the work of the committees and preside over them.

Ministers and, by their delegation, Under Secretaries of State, may participate in the proceedings.

The provisions of this article and those of Articles 12 and 13 also apply to the Senate of the Kingdom.

Art. 15.

Bills of a constitutional nature, pursuant to Article 12 of Law No. 2693 of December 9, 1928-vn; those specified in the last paragraph of Article 1 of Law No. 100 of January 31, 1926-iv; general legislative delegations; draft budgets and final accounts of the State, autonomous state agencies, and administrative bodies of any kind of national importance, subsidized directly or indirectly from the state budget, shall be debated and voted on by the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations and the Senate of the Kingdom in their respective plenary sessions, based on reports from the respective competent committees.

Bills for which the Government requests this form of debate, or for which it is proposed by the respective plenary assemblies or committees and authorized by the Duce of Fascism, Head of the Government, are also debated in the manner indicated in the preceding paragraph.

Voting shall always take place by open ballot.

Art. 16.

Bills not covered by Article 15 above are referred for exclusive consideration to the legislative committees of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations and the Senate of the Kingdom.

Approved bills are transmitted from one Assembly to the other through their respective Presiding Officers.

Within one month of the submission of each bill—a deadline that may be extended by the Duce of Fascism, Head of Government—the text discussed and approved by the legislative committees of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations and the Senate is transmitted to the Duce of Fascism, Head of Government, who shall order that it be submitted to the Sovereign for ratification and promulgated in the ordinary manner established for laws.

The preamble must state that the bill has been approved by the legislative committees of the Chamber and the Senate.

The regulations thus issued have the force of law in every respect.

Art. 17.

The procedure for debate and approval set forth in Article 16 may also be followed for the bills referred to in Article 15, when the Duce of Fascism, Head of Government, so determines for reasons of urgency.

Art. 18.

Provisions shall be made by royal decree, without following the procedure set forth in Article 16, when a state of necessity arises due to war or urgent financial or tax measures.

The same procedure may be followed when the Committees have not fulfilled their duties within the prescribed time limit.

In such cases, the provisions contained in the second paragraph and subsequent paragraphs of Article 3 of Law No. zoo of January 31, 1926-iv, shall apply.

Art. 19.

Corporate regulations drawn up by the Corporations and collective economic agreements entered into by the relevant Associations, when they establish contributions—in any form or under any name—to be borne by members of the categories to which the regulations or agreements refer, may be submitted, for review by the Duce of Fascism, Head of the Government, following examination by the Central Corporate Committee, to the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, so that they may be submitted for review and approval by the competent legislative committee, or, if necessary, by a joint session of committees.

In the event that the committee or the joint committees propose amendments to the text drafted by the Corporations, approval must be referred to the plenary assembly of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations.

The final text is transmitted by the President of the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations to the Duce of Fascism, Head of the Government, who promulgates it by decree to be included in the official collection of laws and decrees of the Kingdom.

Art. 20.

Legal provisions falling within the Government's jurisdiction pursuant to Law No. zoo of January 31, 1926-iv, when they concern technical or economic matters falling within the specific scope of the Corporations' activities, must be preceded—except in cases of urgency—by the opinion of the competent Corporation or of the advisory committee established within it.

Art. 2z.

Any provisions contrary to or incompatible with those contained in this Act are hereby repealed.

3-

Summary Reports on the Activities Carried Out by the General Directorate for the Italian Press Service (1937–38)

a) December 1937.

In December, the General Directorate continued its routine review of daily and periodical press, as well as news agency bulletins, and compiled the daily report for the Duce.

Based on the results of the review, one publication was seized (No. 294 of December 10 of *La Nazione*), and 48 warnings were issued to newspapers.

During the month, the General Directorate issued 160 telephone directives and distributed a total of 392 press releases, of which 242 were for "Stefani" and 130 for newspapers.

Thirty-five news items sourced from the foreign press were also reported, and each item was sent to five or six daily newspapers, one per city.

The service for transmitting articles and news items to the Ministry's other General Directorates, as

well as to the Ministries of National Education and the Interior, continued very actively throughout December.

The General Directorate also regularly compiled the weekly report for His Excellency the Undersecretary of the Interior on the main discussions taking place in the newspapers—especially provincial newspapers and technical journals. A copy of this report was also sent, as usual, to the General Directorate of Personnel of the Ministry of the Interior and to the Central Demographic Office.

Following the directives issued by His Excellency the Minister, the illustrated and entertainment press was re-examined, and instructions were given to ensure that it fulfills its educational duties more effectively. In fact, it was observed that this press, while complying with the provisions to eliminate immoral or otherwise non-educational content, did not adequately address the topics that are of interest to the nation today; it was therefore suggested to the editors of the periodicals in question that they address the following themes: family life, motherhood, home economics, participation in Fascist life, sports, social welfare, and, in general, everything that is in harmony with the new Fascist consciousness.

With regard to Italian fashion, it was recommended to take advantage of the “Textile Exhibition” to further highlight the progress achieved in this field and the contribution that women can make to the struggle for autarky, while remaining within the sphere of the home and family.

The General Directorate, on the other hand, continued its collaboration with provincial newspapers, sending, in December, a number of articles on activities in the Canton of Ticino, and continued to review prints and photographs depicting the Duce, removing from circulation those that did not meet the required standards of aesthetics and dignity.

A selection was also made from among Italian technical publications to identify those that could successfully participate in the Leipzig Fair Exhibition.

During the Christmas and Epiphany holidays, newspapers were permitted to publish four times a week in 8-page editions from December 20 through January 15, and the warning not to mention the custom of Christmas trees was reiterated.

Since it was observed that many newspapers, in order to demonstrate a large circulation, continued to print more copies than necessary, the General Directorate approached the National Federation of Newspaper Publishers to ensure that the dailies under its jurisdiction limit paper consumption to what is strictly necessary, given that the aforementioned authorization for 8-page editions was contingent upon an effective and adequate reduction in print run.

In December, taking into account the increases in the price of paper and in all expenses related to the publication of periodicals, in agreement with the Ministry of Trade and Industry, a reasonable increase in the retail and subscription prices of these publications was authorized, in accordance with a similar request from the Confederation of Industrialists.

[The] General Directorate received 79 applications for new publications during the month, of which only ten were approved due to their recognized necessity and, consequently, did not entail a significant increase in paper consumption. The publication of three supplements to existing periodicals was also authorized, and changes in publication frequency were permitted for two others: namely, *Lavoro Impiegatizio*, which changed from a monthly to a biweekly publication, and *In alto i fanciulli*,

which changed from a biweekly to a weekly publication.

On the other hand, the periodicals “Riviera” of Naples and “La Cartotecnica” were ordered to be discontinued, while, in agreement with the General Directorate for Cinematography, a review of all film-related publications was conducted, resulting in proposals for discontinuations and suspensions.

In December, 860 books were received from the Prefectures and publishers; these were duly cataloged and forwarded to the “Rassegna Generale.”

The Prefectures forwarded 49 publications to this General Directorate for review, of which 6 were seized, 26 were authorized, and 17 are currently under review.

Measures were also taken to definitively regulate serialized publications, and through a specific circular to the Prefects, with the aim of safeguarding the sound education of the people and preventing publishing speculation, it was stipulated that the distribution of novels and other works in installments may be authorized only by the Ministry; that the number of installments shall not exceed 30, with no fewer than 16 pages per installment; and finally, that the price of each installment shall not exceed one lira.

Furthermore, the awarding of prizes to subscribers for such publications has been prohibited.

Arrangements were also made for the preparation of the fourth issue of *Il Libro Italiano*, and work continued on the regulations governing literary prizes.

A preliminary review was also conducted of the applications for the “Lodovico Menicucci” scholarship, and the investigations ordered by this General Directorate—in accordance with the instructions of His Excellency the Minister—were carried out to determine the number of journalists over the age of sixty working for daily newspapers, with the aim of preparing measures for their possible replacement with younger journalists.

The journalists’ biographical unit continued to complete individual files with information received on an ongoing basis from the Journalists’ Unions and the Prefectures.

In addition to this specific activity, the General Directorate has carried out all other routine administrative tasks, including the renewal of journalists’ press passes for the ceremonies of Year XVI, the customary referrals to daily newspapers of unemployed and underprivileged journalists for freelance work and employment, etc.

b) February 1938.

In February 1938 (Year XVI), the General Directorate of the Italian Press carried out its routine review of daily newspapers and periodicals and compiled the daily report for the Duce.

Based on the results of this review, 9 publications were seized and 43 warnings were issued, 18 of which were in writing.

The seizure orders were issued against the following publications:

ILLUSTRAZIONE ITALIANA OPERE E GIORNI

VITA FEMMINILE, a small Rome-based publication; AVVENIRE; DITTALIA; REGIME FASCISTA; ARENA

- * * for a poor-quality photograph of the Duce;

- * * for a short story by M. M. Martini deemed offensive to public morals;

- * * for the collection as a whole;

- * * for attacks on Eden’s policies;

Palermo Sunday Readings—for an article against cinema and theater;

* * *Secolo Illustrato* — for gruesome photographs of executions in Mexico;

In contrast, the following newspapers were praised:

Corriere Mercantile — for establishing the

Guf;

Regime Fascista —for Picenardi’s article “Mussolini’s Fortune.”

To better guide the newspapers, 116 telephone directives were issued in February.

A total of 415 press releases were distributed by the General Directorate, of which 193 were for “Stefani” and 222 for the newspapers.

In addition, 23 news items were sourced from the foreign press, and each item was sent to five or six daily newspapers, one per city.

The service of reporting articles and news items to the General Directorates for Cinematography, Theater, Foreign Press, Tourism, and other ministries remained very active throughout February.

The offices continued compiling the weekly press review for the Undersecretary of State for the Interior, which summarizes, by subject, the main discussions and controversies on current issues, and copies of this report were sent to the General Directorate of Personnel and the Central Demographic Office of the Ministry of the Interior.

Articles and studies on important issues concerning the Empire were forwarded to the Viceroy’s Government in Addis Ababa.

Finally, a detailed report on the activities carried out by the General Directorate of the Italian Press over the past year, including political references, was compiled for the Cabinet of His Excellency the

Minister to serve as a basis for the Minister’s speech in Parliament.

In February, 40 applications for authorization of new publications were received, of which only 17 were approved because they were deemed useful and, on the whole, did not entail a significant increase in paper consumption.

The prefects submitted 60 books to the Ministry for review, of which 14 were seized, 5 were banned, and 2 were authorized subject to modifications.

Publishers submitted 958 books, which were duly cataloged and sent to the General Bibliographic Review.

The General Directorate has developed a plan for “Book Week,” which, in accordance with the Duce’s decisions, is to take place May 23–30 of this year. In this plan, drawing on lessons learned from past experience, efforts have been made to address the shortcomings and deficiencies noted in the past, so as to ensure the success of this important event.

In February, the second issue of *Il Libro Italiano* was published.

Detailed plans have been drawn up for the major official publication to be issued by the Ministry on the occasion of Chancellor Hitler’s visit to Italy, and arrangements have also been made for the publication of several propaganda pamphlets to be distributed during the same event.

Designs for postcards intended to commemorate the event were also reviewed.

In February, the General Directorate resumed, on a larger scale, the program of collaboration with journalists compensated directly by the Ministry; in this regard, a plan was drawn up to utilize writers according to their special aptitudes in covering topics that may be of genuine interest. Thus, provincial newspapers will have the opportunity to improve the overall quality of their third pages through this collaboration.

Given that the domestic paper market is beginning to return to a certain degree of normality, the Directorate has examined the advisability of implementing a reduction in paper prices for daily newspapers and periodicals.

This review concluded that direct intervention in this regard is premature at this time and that a reduction in the price of newsprint may occur in the second half of May, once the situation on the international market becomes clearer.

As for magazine paper, it has been observed that prices are returning to normal, as paper manufacturers have begun to lower prices on their own initiative; indeed, over the past month, the price of fine calendered paper has fallen on average from 220 to 205, and that of standard calendered paper from 195 to 180.

Consideration was also given to approaching the Ministry of Finance to request the repeal of the provision extending the sales tax to fashion magazines, which places a considerable burden on their already precarious financial situation.

In this regard, it was pointed out to the Ministry of Finance that revoking this provision would be

advisable both to improve the situation of fashion magazines in the face of competition from similar foreign publications and to encourage the efforts that national magazines are making to strengthen domestic production in this sector.

Work continued on compiling the biographical database of journalists, and plans were studied for establishing a rational cataloging system for publications issued in Italy, which should allow them to be classified by frequency of publication, subject matter, and the province in which they are printed.

The work of assisting unemployed journalists or those in need of work continued at a very intense pace; unfortunately, the results were meager, given the circumstances of most newspapers, which have surplus staff and contributors.

All other routine administrative tasks were carried out, which cannot be covered in detail in this report.

c) April 1938.

In April, the General Directorate of the Italian Press compiled the daily report for the Duce.

During the month in question, the review was extended to 81 daily newspapers, 132 political periodicals, 3,860 miscellaneous periodicals, 7,000 parish bulletins, 32 news agencies, and the majority of Italian newspapers published abroad.

Based on the results of this review, 9 warnings were issued and the seizure of the following newspapers was ordered:

- * * “Il Popolo di Roma,” dated April 10, for the first installment of Lucio D’Ambra’s novel, deemed immoral;

- * * “Il Popolo di Roma,” dated April 24, for an inappropriate article on Spain;

— * * *La Stampa-Sera*, dated April 13, for unlawfully reproducing an article by the Duce;

- “Il Lavoro di Genova,” dated April 12, for indiscretions regarding the Führer’s visit;

— “Il Piccolo di Roma,” dated April 16, for the complex;

— “La Tribuna,” dated April 19, for publishing data on the number of casualties in Spain;

— “Il Travaso delle Idee,” dated May 1, for its overall content.

The following, however, were commended: “Il Regime Fascista” of April 12, for the op-ed by Hon. Farinacci, and “Il Veneto” of April 27, for an article by Natale Busetto on the personality of the Duce.

In April, the General Directorate issued 119 telephone directives to newspapers and distributed 430 press releases, 230 of which were for “Stefani.”

The service of reporting articles and news items to other General Directorates and to the Ministries of National Education, Corporations, Italian Africa, etc., continued actively, as did the compilation of the weekly review of topics covered by the press for the Undersecretary of State for the Interior.

Journalists admitted to paid collaboration with the Ministry submitted numerous articles, which the offices reviewed and distributed for publication to provincial newspapers and to other publications that had requested them.

A total of 1,206 books were received from publishers and prefectures; these were duly cataloged and forwarded to the Bibliographic Review.

Of the 40 books submitted for review, 2 were seized, 3 were banned, 2 were authorized subject to modifications, 21 were authorized without reservation, and 12 are still under review.

In April, books by foreign authors began arriving for approval of their Italian translations.

The General Directorate received and reviewed 20 applications for new publications, of which only 1 was considered because it was deemed to be of genuine necessity.

Instructions were issued to the Prefects to prohibit newspapers from publishing classified ads and advertisements in general that contain job offers from foreign nationals wishing to relocate to Italy.

Instructions were also issued to the major daily newspapers to ensure that EIAR announcements are not interspersed among advertisements but are prominently displayed; the management of the respective newspapers was also invited to accept the EIAR's proposals to establish special agreements regarding the rates for such advertisements.

On the occasion of the Giro d'Italia cycling race, Turin's *La Stampa* was authorized to publish a third evening edition for the entire duration of the race.

A great deal of effort was devoted in April to organizing journalistic coverage of the Führer's visit to Italy.

The General Directorate prepared three booklets for this occasion, published by Ulpiano, intended to introduce the German Chancellor, the National Socialist movement, and the achievements of New Germany.

All badges, postcards, prints, paintings, etc., intended to celebrate Italian-German friendship were also examined, and only those distinguished by a successful and artistic design were authorized for distribution and sale.

This work was carried out through the Prefectures, with diligence and promptness, in order to avoid economic harm to the companies that had initiated the various and numerous events.

Agreements were also finalized with the German Ministry of Propaganda for the exchange of Italian and German journalists, with the aim of fostering mutual understanding of their respective countries.

The General Directorate continued to refer unemployed or needy journalists to the management of daily newspapers for professional placements or freelance assignments.

All other routine administrative tasks were carried out, which cannot be listed in detail here.

Funds Disbursed for Public Works by the Duce's Private Secretariat in Selected Provinces

PROVINCE OF AGRIGENTO

Licata, regulation of the Salso River L. 500,000 April 1936 F. Provvida
Aragona, Casa Littoria 5,000 August 1937 Donations
Agrigento, Mother and Child Home, Santo Stefano Quisquina, boarding school 50,000 August 1937 F. PS
daycare center 36,000 February 1942 F. PS
Naro, Sant'Agostino Middle School 60,000 May 1943 F. PS
L. 651,000

PROVINCE OF ASTI.

Asti, Mother and Child Home L. 50,000 January 1937 Donations
Grazzano Monferrato, Daycare Center 70,000 February 1937 1 February 1939 Donations F. Charity
Grazzano Monferrato, Casa Littoria 100,000 February 1938 f F. Public Works (Donations
Serole Road – Spingo Station 310,500 May 1939 F. PS
L. 530,500

PROVINCE OF AVELLINO

Avellino, public housing L. 1,000,000 - (December 1936 (August 1939 |f. PS
Lacedonia, seminary 50,000 November 1942 F. PS
Castelbaronia, nursery school 3,000 May 1943 F. charity
Bisaccia, cathedral 20,000 May 1943 F. PS
L. 1,073,000

PROVINCE OF CAMPOBASSO

Campobasso, Casa Littoria L. 100,000 ' (September 1937 [December 1937 | Donations
Castellino, public housing 200,000 November 1937 Donations
Campolieto, Consolidation 150,000 November 1938 Construction costs
Frosolone, public housing 150,000 November 1938 Construction costs
Pagliarone, shelter 200,000 November 1938 Construction costs
Trivento, cathedral 20,000 November 1942 Public Works Fund

L. 820,000

PROVINCE OF COSENZA

Cosenza, Casa Littoria L. 600,000 | | August 1932 [March 1939 F. Provvida
San Marco Argentano, Cathedral 200,000 April 1933 F. Provvida
Altomonte, Church of San Domenico IO OOO November 1936 F. Provvida
Cosenza, public housing 600 OOO March 1939 F. PS
Cosenza, hospital 500 OOO March 1939 F. PS
Cosenza, Mother and Child Home 300 OOO March 1939 F. PS
Cosenza, Barracks 400,000 March 1939 F. PS
Corigliano Calabro, Fishermen's Houses 650,000 < (December 1940 – December 1941) Tenders F. Works
Cosenza, Disinfection Station 150,000 April 1942 Tenders
L. 3,410,000

PROVINCE OF MACERATA

Corridonia, monument to Corridoni L. 500,000 July 1936 F. Provvida
Portocivitanova, workers' theater 20,000 December 1936 Bids
Camerino, Student House IOO OOO November 1938 F. works
Recanati, headquarters of the Leopardi Studies Center 950 OOO [February 1940] [November 1942] F. PS
735150 Committed F. PS
San Severino, hospital 120 OOO April 1942 F. PS
Matelica, Serravalle del Chienti Hospital, parish church 180,000 October 1942 F. PS 15,000 October 1942 F. PS
Treia, Civil Hospital 100,000 April 1943 F. PS
L. 2,720,150

PROVINCE OF MATERA

Rural aqueducts and olive grove reclamation L. 5 50 000 November 1937 Donations
Matera, schools 600 OOO November 1938 F. works
Bernalda, Mother and Child Home IO OOO May 1939 F. works
L. 1 160000

PROVINCE OF PERUGIA

Assisi, Convent of St. Francis L. 100,000 December 1935 Donations
Fontivegge, Casa Littoria 50,000 July 1936 Donations
Pila, Casa Littoria 30,000 December 1936 Donations
Spoleto, Casa Littoria 25,000 May 1937 Donations
Gubbio, school building 1838 930] (November 1937 [December 1942 Bids F. PS
Gubbio, water system for outlying villages 561070 [November 1937 [December 1942 Bids F. PS

continued: Province of Perugia

Gubbio, Capuchin Monastery IO OOO May 1938 Construction
Casaglia, aqueduct 60 OOO June 1938 Construction
Passaggio di Bettona, nursery school 45 OOO February 1938 Construction
Nocera Umbra, aqueduct 60 OOO November 1938 Construction
Castiglion del Lago, castle 10,000 February 1939 F. works
Perugia, public housing 400,000 March 1939 Bids
Serre Mosciano, aqueduct 20,000 July 1941 F. works
Spoleto, Bambin Gesù Institute 55,000 | [November 1941 [March 1943, Jf. PS
Castelvecchio-Preci, aqueduct 600,000 March 1942 Donations
Trevi, institute 50,000 October 1942 F. PS
Spoleto, hospital 500,000 November 1942 Donations
Assisi, convent and church of San Quirico 45,000 March 1943 F. PS

L. 4,460,000

PROVINCE OF RAVENNA

Faenza, Government Office Building L. 500,000 June 1937 F. PS
San Pietro in Vincoli, Church 10,000 October 1937 F. Provvida

Faenza, Ring Road 500,000 January 1938 F. Works
Mosaic Restoration 100,000 February 1938 Donations
Mountain Hospice [March 1938 Bids
70,000 June 1938 Construction work
Ravenna, Casa Littoria 20,000 March 1938 Bids
Cervia, sports field 75,000 June 1938 Construction work
Cervia, coastal road and pine forest 150,000 June 1938 Construction work
Faenza, public housing 250,000 June 1938 Construction
Cardello Aqueduct 100,000 December 1938 Donations
Casola Valsenio, orphanage 50,000 December 1938 Donations
Fusignano, GIL House 50,000 February 1939 Construction
Ravenna, Hospital 3 6,000,000 j [February 1940 [December 1941 Bids F. PS
Faenza, Market 1,000,000 April 1940 Bids
Brisighella, Public Housing 148,700 March 1940 F. PS
Borgo Sisa, public housing 520,000 May 1941 Public Works Fund
Casola Valsenio, infirmary 400,000 June 1941 Public Works Fund
Casola Valsenio, public housing 500,000 August 1941 Bids
Fusignano, public housing 60,000 September 1941 Public Works Fund

L. 503,700, of which one million from the Ministry of the Interior.

PROVINCE OF ROME

Rome, headquarters of the Royal Geological Office L. 2 5 0 000 November 1934 Bids
Rome, Ara Pacis 35 000 December 1936 F. PS
Gerano, nursery school 22485 June 1937 F. PS
Nemi, conservation of Roman ships 100000 July 1937 Bids
Sant'Alessio, Institute for the Blind 2,050,000 j [July 1937 [April 1938! Donations
Affile, Sanitation 135,000 J [July 1937 – June 1940 F. PS F. Works
Rome, Casa Littoria in Torrespaccata 3,000 August 1937 Donations
Arcinazzo, nursery school 20,000 September 1937 Charity Fund
Nettuno, church 10,000 April 1938 Works Fund
Rome, Molario Cogia Institute 500,000 July 1938 Public Safety Fund
Rome, tomb of Alfredo Rocco IOO OOO August 1938 F. PS
Gavignano, monastery; Rome, Church of St. Joseph on Via 63 OOO November 1938 F. works
Nomentana 350 OOO November 1938 F. works
Pomezia, public works in the hamlet of Ardea 720,000 j [December 1938 [November 1939 b. PS
Rocca di Cave, Rome aqueduct, Cavallerizza della Legione del 200,000 December 1938 f February 1939 F. PS
Lazio of the CC.RR. 34,000] F. Works
June 1939
Rome, Royal Italian Historical Institute 30,000 March 1939 F. Works
Rome, Abbey of the Three Fountains; Anzio, Public Housing in the Fa- 300,000 May 1939 F. PS
Lasche 500,000 July 1939 F. Works
Albano Laziale, public housing 500,000 May 1940 Donations
Pisoniano, nursery school 15,000 June 1940 F. Works

Rome, headquarters of the Tata Giovanni Institute 150,000 September 1940 F. PS
Civitavecchia, Civil Hospital Rome, headquarters of the Pia Unione Lauretana delle 650,000
May 1941 F. Works
Roman Ladies 800,000 November 1941 F. PS
Frascati, Girls' Orphanage of the Maestre Pie Filippine Rome, Convent of the Poor Clares, Via Monfer-
200,000 December 1941 F. PS 50,000 March 1942 F. PS
Rome, to ENDIROT for ammonia fuel production facilities Rome, San Francesco Institute (orphanage-
500,000 March 1942 F. PS
daycare center) 60,000 November 1942 F. PS
Rome, Nursery School of the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration Rome, Institute for the Assistance and
Care of Children 50,000 December 1942 F. PS
Tuberculosis Patients 1,000,000 February 1943 Donations
Rome, Royal Institute of Roman Studies 290,000 March 1943 F. PS

L. 9 677485

PROVINCE OF UDINE

Udine, Ossuary Temple L. 400,000 - (June 1936 (September 1938 Donations F. PS
Marano and Lauco, schools IOO OOO September 1938 F. PS
Udine, public housing 500 OOO September 1938 F. PS
Timau, ossuary church 30,000 March 1938 F. Works
Udine, rural works 150,000 November 1937 Donations
Aquileia, basilica 120,000 December 1938 F. PS
Aquileia, rural school in Salmastro 100,000 July 1941 Donations
Resia, rural school in the hamlet of Uccea 200,000 July 1941 Donations
Marano, public housing (water systems) 100,000 April 1942 Donations
Etocasso, aqueduct 150,000 L. 1,850,000 May 1942 F. PS

PROVINCE OF VENICE

Venice, Church of San Polo L. IO OOO November 1934 F. PS
Chioggia, Civil Hospital 650 OOO j (September 1941 [December 1942 Ìf. PS
Venice, Chioggia Civil Hospital, ancillary work on existing housing 500,000 January 1942
Bids 250,000 January 1942 Bids
Chioggia, basic housing for evicted residents 350,000 January 1942 Bids
Lido, Ospedale al Mare 500,000 January 1943 Bids

L. 2,260,000

The "Manifesto of the Race" (July 14, 1938)

and the draft of its new version (April 25, 1942)

a) The "Manifesto of Race" \

1. Human races exist. The existence of human races is not merely an abstraction of our mind, but corresponds to a phenomenal, material reality perceptible through our senses. This reality is represented by masses—almost always vast—of millions of people, similar in physical and

psychological traits that were inherited and continue to be inherited. To say that human races exist does not mean a priori that there are superior and inferior human races, but only that there are different human races.

2. There are major races and minor races. We must not only acknowledge the existence of larger systematic groups—commonly called races and distinguished only by a few characteristics—but we must also acknowledge the existence of smaller systematic groups (such as the Nordic, Mediterranean, and Dinaric types, etc.) distinguished by a greater number of common characteristics. From a biological standpoint, these groups constitute the true races, the existence of which is an evident truth.

3. The concept of race is a purely biological concept. It is therefore based on considerations other than the concepts of "people" and "nation," which are founded essentially on historical, linguistic, and religious considerations. However, underlying the differences between peoples and nations are differences in race. If Italians are different from the French, the Germans, the Turks, the Greeks, etc., it is not only because they have a different language and a different history, but because the racial composition of these peoples is different. It is varying proportions of different races that have, since very ancient times, constituted the various peoples—whether one race exercises absolute dominance over the others, whether all are harmoniously blended, or, finally, whether the different races still persist without having assimilated one another.

1 The "Manifesto of the Race" was first published on July 14, 1938, without any signatures. The names of the signatories were made public on July 25 in a statement issued by the PNF. The published text was a reworking (by Mussolini and various officials of the Ministry of Popular Culture) of the original, so much so that Pende insistently asked Mussolini's secretary to publish a "new declaration submitted by the Race Commission to the Leader." It appears that Visco also lodged protests against the publication. For further details, see R. de Felice, *History of the Italian Jews under Fascism*, op. cit., pp. 275 ff.

4. The population of present-day Italy is of Aryan origin, and its civilization is Aryan. This population of Aryan civilization has inhabited our peninsula for several millennia; very little remains of the civilization of the pre-Aryan peoples. The origin of present-day Italians stems essentially from elements of those very same races that constitute and have constituted the perpetually living fabric of Europe.

5. The notion of massive migrations of people in historical times is a myth. After the Lombard invasion, there were no other significant population movements in Italy capable of influencing the nation's racial makeup. It follows that, while the racial composition of other European nations has varied considerably even in modern times, for Italy, broadly speaking, today's racial composition is the same as it was a thousand years ago: the vast majority of today's 44 million Italians thus trace their lineage to families that have lived in Italy for a millennium.

6. A pure "Italian race" now exists. This statement is not based on confusing the biological concept of race with the historical-linguistic concept of people and nation, but on the purest blood kinship that unites today's Italians with the generations that have inhabited Italy for millennia. This ancient purity of blood is the Italian nation's greatest mark of nobility.

7. It is time for Italians to openly declare themselves racists. All the work the Regime has done in Italy thus far is, at its core, racism. References to the concept of race have always been a frequent feature of the Leader's speeches. The issue of racism in Italy must be addressed from a purely

biological standpoint, without philosophical or religious overtones. The conception of racism in Italy must be essentially Italian and follow the Aryan-Nordic model. This does not mean, however, introducing German theories of racism into Italy as they are, or asserting that Italians and Scandinavians are the same. Rather, it simply aims to present Italians with a physical and, above all, psychological model of the human race that, due to its purely European characteristics, stands completely apart from all non-European races; this means elevating Italians to an ideal of greater self-awareness and greater responsibility.

8. It is necessary to make a clear distinction between the (Western) Mediterraneans of Europe on the one hand, and Easterners and Africans on the other. Therefore, theories that assert the African origin of certain Europeans and include Semitic and Hamitic populations within a common Mediterranean race—thereby establishing absolutely unacceptable ideological connections and affinities—must be considered dangerous.

9. Jews do not belong to the Italian race. Of the Semites who, over the centuries, have set foot on the sacred soil of our homeland, nothing in general

remains. Even the Arab occupation of Sicily left nothing behind except the memory of a few names; and, moreover, the process of assimilation was always extremely rapid in Italy. The Jews represent the only population that has never assimilated in Italy because they are composed of non-European racial elements, absolutely distinct from the elements that gave rise to the Italians.

The purely European physical and psychological characteristics of Italians must not be altered in any way. Intermarriage is permissible only among European races; in such cases, one cannot speak of true hybridization, since these races belong to a common group and differ only in a few characteristics, while they are identical in many others. The purely European character of Italians is altered by interbreeding with any non-European race that carries a civilization different from the millennia-old Aryan civilization.

Dr. Lino Businco, Assistant Professor of General Pathology at the University of Rome.

Prof. Lidio Cipriani, lecturer in anthropology at the University of Florence.

Prof. Arturo Donaggio, director of the neuropsychiatric clinic at the University of Bologna.

Dr. Leone Franzi, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Milan.

Prof. Guido Landra, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Rome.

Prof. Sen. Nicola Pende, Director of the Institute of Special Medical Pathology at the University of Rome.

Dr. Marcello Ricci, Assistant Professor of Zoology at the University of Rome.

Prof. Franco Savorgnan, Professor of Demography at the University of Rome.

Prof. Sabato Visco, Director of the Institute of General Physiology at the University of Rome.

Prof. Edoardo Zavattari, Director of the Institute of Special Medical Zoology at the University of

Rome.

b) Criticisms of the “Manifesto of Race” formulated within the Higher Council for Demography and Race (1941–42).

1.

Human races exist.[2]

The existence of human races is not merely an abstraction of our minds, but corresponds to a phenomenal, material reality perceptible through our senses. This reality is represented by masses—almost always vast—of millions of people, similar in physical and psychological traits that were inherited and continue to be inherited. To say that human races exist does not mean a priori that there are superior and inferior human races, but only that there are different human races.

The caption is naive. The illustration is illogical and fails precisely to provide a concrete definition. Everything boils down to the similarity of inherited and heritable physical and psychological traits within large human groups (millions of people). This statement also applies to defining the human species. Therefore, to understand the word “race,” it is necessary to establish, in advance, the physical and psychological characteristics—whether few or many—to which one refers when moving from the concept of species to that of race. The a priori denial of a racial hierarchy stands in contrast to the racial criterion, which must acknowledge the differing historical fortunes of human races.

2.

There are major races and minor races.

We must not only acknowledge the existence of larger systematic groups—commonly called races and distinguished only by a few characteristics—but we must also acknowledge the existence of smaller systematic groups (such as the Nordic, Mediterranean, and Dinaric groups, etc.) distinguished by a greater number of common characteristics. From a biological standpoint, these groups constitute the true races, the existence of which is an evident truth.

Evidently, the intention here is to discuss the major subdivisions of the human species into whites, blacks, and Asians—groups characterized by certain physical traits that most strike the senses, though these traits do not, however, possess absolute scientific value for the definition of human races. Given this premise, if it is improper to refer to the minor systematic groups as “true races,” then these would be nothing more than varieties of the major races.

Therefore, for the purposes of a race policy, should one refer to major or minor groups?

Furthermore, this definition implicitly excludes the existence of racial complexes (such as the “Italian Aryan,” etc.) mentioned in No. 6.

3-

The concept of race is a purely biological concept.

It is therefore based on considerations other than the concepts of “people” and “nation,” which are essentially founded on historical, linguistic, and religious considerations. However, at the root of the differences between peoples and nations lie racial differences.

If Italians are different from the French, the Germans, the Turks, the Greeks, etc., it is not only because they have a different language and a different history, but because the racial composition of these peoples consists of varying proportions of different races that have, since very ancient times, constituted the various peoples—whether one race has absolute dominance over the others, whether all are harmoniously blended, or, finally, whether the different races still persist without having assimilated one another.

It is entirely correct to state that the concept of race cannot lie outside the realm of biology. Morphological, physiological, and psychological traits alike are transmitted from person to person through the mechanism of heredity. The fact remains that these traits can be modified over time by endogenous and exogenous factors, and thus the genetic heritage exhibits new traits that either enrich or impair individuals.

Biologically speaking, the concept of race can be accepted when, upon examining large human groups, characteristics are identified that are common to all individuals within the group and are heritably transmissible.

The authors state that while the concepts of “people” and “nation” are based essentially on historical, linguistic, religious, and other considerations, at the same time the differences between one people and another, between one nation and another, are based on racial differences—which appears to be a contradiction in terms.

Aware of this, the authors fall back on the proportion of the different races that have contributed to the formation of the various peoples, but this still implies that the concepts of “people” and “nation” are essentially racial concepts.

4-

The population of present-day Italy is of Aryan origin, and its civilization is Aryan.

This population, with its Aryan civilization, has inhabited our peninsula for several millennia; very little remains of the civilization of the pre-Aryan peoples. The origin of today’s Italians stems essentially from elements of those very same races that constitute and have constituted the perpetually living fabric of Europe.

The notion of the Aryan race is a product of modern linguistic research into the languages documented across a vast territory, stretching from the Tarim Basin, through India and Persia, to all of Europe.

Evidently, while a language always presupposes a human group that produced it, it does not, however, provide any criterion for the biological definition of the corresponding human type.

Therefore, when speaking of the Aryan race, one can at most assume that the reference is to white human groups, but not to all people of the white race, because this category includes some (Basques, Caucasians, Finns) who cannot in any way be traced back to an Aryan origin.

To claim, furthermore, that very little remains on our peninsula of the civilization of the pre-Aryan peoples constitutes an unjustified and unprovable denial of the anthropological, ethnological, and archaeological discoveries that have been made and continue to be made in our country.

The civilization of Italy's population is said to be Aryan, whereas it has been proven that numerous exotic influences from different races shaped the development of the civilization of our peninsula's indigenous population, just as they did for Hellenic civilization.

It would be difficult to understand why the Aryan civilization, if it had been perfectly autonomous, would have developed so early on the Greek and Italian peninsulas, while it would have remained in even primitive forms in the Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Slavic, and Celtic countries.

On the other hand, the obvious differences between Hellenic civilization and Italian and Roman civilization demonstrate the predominant guiding influence of the indigenous peoples in the historical development of these two civilizations.

The notion of massive migrations of people in historical times is a myth.

After the Lombard invasion, there were no other significant population movements in Italy capable of influencing the nation's racial makeup. It follows that, while the racial composition of other European nations has varied considerably even in modern times, in Italy, broadly speaking, today's racial composition is the same as it was a thousand years ago; the vast majority of today's forty-four million Italians thus trace their lineage to families that have inhabited Italy for a millennium.

The statement in the title is accurate, but in developing this argument, when discussing historical periods, it is necessary to go back much further than the barbarian invasions in general and the Lombard invasion in particular.

Modern scholarship has shown that the invasions that took place after the fall of the Roman Empire were carried out by numerically modest groups. Suffice it to recall that a few thousand Byzantine mercenaries led by the eunuch Narses were sufficient to expel all the Goths from Italy, and that the Lombards themselves, outside of Pavia, consisted only of small groups of feudal warriors, who, leaving no trace of their influence, quickly disappeared, absorbed into the Italian population.

It should also be noted that while here the authors assert that the population of modern Italy consists of the descendants of the families who inhabited our peninsula a thousand years ago, in section 4 they state that the population of Aryan civilization has inhabited our country for several millennia.

It may also be pointed out—although the authors do not state this explicitly—that the statement, as it stands, implicitly attributes to the barbarian invasions a formative influence on the Italian race that is, in truth, disproportionate to the number of invaders and their capacity for biological dominance.

On the contrary, the biological dominance of Italians over all non-native groups has been demonstrated.

6.

A pure "Italian race" now exists.

This statement is not based on a confusion of the biological concept of race with the historical-linguistic concept of people and nation, but on the purest blood kinship that unites today's Italians with the generations that have inhabited Italy for millennia. This ancient purity of blood is the greatest mark of nobility of the Italian nation.

There is an Italian "race"—not a "pure" Italian race.

After all, there are no longer any pure human races on earth, and all scholars agree on this observation.

The fact remains, however, that the Italian race as it appears to us today descends—through an extremely close, if not entirely pure, bloodline—from the generations that have inhabited the peninsula for millennia upon millennia.

Here too, the authors rightly assert—as they did in Issue 4—the antiquity of our race spanning many millennia, which, however, contradicts the single millennium of antiquity attributed to it in Issue 5.

7-

It is time for Italians to openly declare themselves racists.

All the work the Regime has done in Italy so far is, at its core, racism. References to the concept of race have always been very frequent in the leader's speeches.

The issue of racism in Italy must be addressed from a purely biological standpoint, without philosophical or religious overtones.

The conception of racism in Italy must be essentially Italian and follow the Aryan-Nordic orientation. This does not, however, mean introducing German theories of racism into Italy as they are, or asserting that Italians and Scandinavians are one and the same. Rather, it simply aims to present Italians with a physical and, above all, psychological model of the human race that, due to its purely European characteristics, stands completely apart from all non-European races; this means elevating the Italian to an ideal of greater self-awareness and greater responsibility.

While there is nothing to object to in the first and second parts of this statement, the last paragraph, however, is manifestly inconsistent.

The authors assert that the concept of racism in Italy must be essentially Italian, but… "of the Aryan-Nordic orientation." In essence, this means that the Italian concept must be based on Nordism, which, as everyone knows, categorically denies any virtue to Mediterraneans, whom it considers slave peoples.

This also means repudiating the entire Italian civilization, which, according to the Nordists, has brought about barbarization and cultural deviation within the civilization of the "pure" Nordics. The latter, on the other hand, despite their proclaimed superiority, have in fact remained, in essence, subservient to Mediterranean civilization in general and to Italian civilization in particular. A strange contradiction in terms that the Northern nationalists have not bothered to eliminate from their writings.

However, according to the authors, the Aryan-Nordic approach must not imply the adoption of the tenets of "German racism" or assert that "Scandinavians and Italians are the same thing."

It is not clear in what way the Aryan-Nordic orientation differs substantially from German racism, but the authors explain that they “merely wish to present to Italians a physical and, above all, psychological model of the human race which, due to its purely European characteristics, stands completely apart from all non-European races,” though it is unclear how the authors, without contradicting themselves, intend to “elevate the Italian to an ideal of superior self-awareness.”

While a physical model can be attributed to an artist and a psychological model to an educator, it serves no purpose to attribute it to a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation. One might think that the authors intended to point out to Italians the desirability of sexual unions between human types possessing the morphological and psychological characteristics of the Nordic peoples, but it is unclear how this implicit devaluation of the physical and psychological type of Italians could elevate them to an ideal and superior sense of self and to greater responsibility.

There is no point in dwelling on the patriotic aspect of these orientations, nor on how little they align with the asserted purity of the Italian race.

8.

A clear distinction must be made between the (Western) Mediterraneans of Europe on the one hand, and Easterners and Africans on the other.

Theories that assert the African origin of certain European peoples and include Semitic and Hamitic populations within a common Mediterranean race—thereby establishing absolutely unacceptable ideological connections and affinities—must therefore be considered dangerous.

One can objectively discuss, in a scientific context, whether or not European populations have African origins, without this posing a danger; what is dangerous, however, is to forget that there was a Mediterranean unity, which was realized politically under the aegis of Rome. In any case, the authors confuse racial origins with ideological relationships and sympathies within the same period.

We might, for example, find it advantageous to have political and ideological ties and sympathies with the Arabs in their struggle for independence from the Anglo-Saxons, without, however, having to invoke a common racial origin.

Mediterranean Africa is different from the rest of Africa. From a racial standpoint, it is important to move beyond the misunderstanding created by the geographical designation: Africa.

This continent has had and continues to have a distinct racial history depending on whether one considers the region north of the Sahara, the equatorial region, or the southern region.

Mediterranean Africa, in particular, has had continuous and well-documented relations with all the Mediterranean peoples, but very few with the true Black peoples of equatorial Africa.

This, moreover, is easily understood when one considers the isolating effect of the Sahara Desert.

9-

Jews do not belong to the Italian race.

Of the Semites who, over the centuries, have set foot on the sacred soil of our homeland, generally nothing has remained. Even the Arab occupation of Sicily left nothing behind except the memory of a few names; and, moreover, the process of assimilation was always extremely rapid in Italy.

Jews represent the only population that has never assimilated in Italy because they are composed of non-European racial elements that are absolutely distinct from those that gave rise to the Italians.

The statement is self-evident: no one has claimed any racial commonality between Jews and Italians.

On the other hand, the authors assert two contradictory things, namely: while on the one hand the Semitic Jews have remained unassimilated in Italy because they consist of non-European racial elements (absolutely distinct from the elements that gave rise to the Italians)—almost postulating a mutual sexual repugnance—on the other hand they assert that nothing remains of the Semitic Arabs, since “the process of assimilation was always extremely rapid in Italy.”

Thus, the Semitic race would be divided into two groups: one assimilable by the Italian race and the other not.

The authors do not tell us how this assertion can be scientifically justified.

I.

The purely European physical and psychological characteristics of Italians must not be altered in any way.

Intermarriage is permissible only among European races; in such cases, one cannot speak of true hybridization, since these races belong to a common group and differ only in a few characteristics, while they are identical in many others. The purely European character of Italians is altered by interbreeding with any non-European race that carries a civilization different from the millennia-old Aryan civilization.

While No. 6 proclaims the purity of the Italian race, here the authors admit its interbreeding with other European races, since, in their view—but not in that of German racists—such interbreeding would not give rise to true hybridism, due to the fact that these races belong to a “common body”—a new term whose meaning would benefit from some clarification.

It is not possible, based on scientific data, to establish that all European races belong to a single stock or “common body,” since there are racial groups in Europe of Uro-Altaic, Mongolian, Aryan, Caucasian, Iberian, and other origins.

Therefore, the authors’ “Europeanism” legitimizes interbreeding between Aryans and non-Aryans, which, according to the most logical and well-founded predictions, should give rise to the formation of true hybrids. If, on the other hand, intermarriage is desired only among self-proclaimed Aryan groups, this legitimizes intermarriage with non-European races, which—contrary to the authors’ assertions—would bring a civilization that is by no means “different” from the millennia-old Aryan civilization.

c) New text of the “Manifesto of the Race” approved by the Higher Council for Demography and Race on April 25, 1942.

Human races are to be considered varieties of the species distinguished by specific physical and psychological characteristics, of which cultures and civilizations are concrete manifestations. These characteristics are inscribed in the genetic heritage and are therefore transmissible through the generations.

Environmental influences and contact with other groups have contributed over the millennia to shaping the characteristics of today's civilized human groups.

The differences that characterize an ethnic group therefore stem not only from the transmission of fundamental genetic elements but also from distinctive creative forces, which take shape and manifest themselves over the course of generations in relation to the environment, the numerical proportions of the human groups that have come into contact, and the nature of the interactions they have engaged in with one another—a process in which elective affinity plays a decisive role.

On the Italian Peninsula, bounded on land by the Alpine barrier—which acted as a barrier against large-scale invasions—and surrounded on all other sides by the sea—which, while also impeding large-scale invasions, facilitated trade and cultural exchange—the presence of humans undoubtedly dates back to the very dawn of humanity.

Humans, in fact, have inhabited Italy since the very earliest times when they first appeared in Europe. Their existence during the most remote periods of the Quaternary is evidenced by specific Paleolithic artifacts, and even though their physical characteristics are unknown, they constitute the "proto-anthropoid of Italy."

In the Middle Pleistocene, human existence is documented by the groups to which the Saccopastore and Circeo humans belong. The discovery of the fossil remains of these humans can be considered the first documented chapter in human history on Italian soil.

Modern human groups trace their ancestry to the ancient people of the Upper Quaternary, who can rightly be called Proto-Mediterranean Italics; they appear in large numbers in the caves of Liguria, Tuscany, Abruzzo, and Sicily, and have left clear traces of their cultural activities throughout the peninsula.

Therefore, Italy's oldest culture is contemporary with that of other European countries, and it can reasonably be assumed that it underwent a local and partially autonomous development here toward the higher forms of Neolithic civilization.

One can therefore postulate the existence in Italy, as far back as the Upper Paleolithic, of a race endowed with great creative and assimilative qualities, destined to ensure the prevalence of its own physical type and its own ethnic and cultural genius. From these indigenous groups emerged a prehistoric race—the creator of Neolithic civilization—composed predominantly of human types that are still widely distributed throughout the peninsula today.

Much later in Europe—and consequently also in Italy—a new ethnic landscape emerged with the arrival of human groups who spoke languages known as Aryan or Indo-European. These groups of the Aryan language family must have found a way to coexist early on with the Proto-Mediterraneans of Italy, as occurred throughout Europe and, to some extent, on the Asian continent, and as demonstrated by the analysis of the Indo-European languages, which, while exhibiting essentially Aryan phonetics and morphology, retain extensive traces of substrate influence in their lexicon.

The cultural contribution of these Aryan groups influenced the development of the original Italic civilization because it found favorable conditions there, by virtue of the level of development that civilization had already attained. If this were not the case, it would be impossible to explain why these groups, having penetrated the rest of Europe, remained for many centuries incapable of creating a civilization even remotely comparable to that of our peninsula. From the fusion of these two ethnic elements and their cultural genius—along with undeniable Mediterranean influences—arose the type of civilization found in Italy at the dawn of history.

Our prehistory unmistakably appears as a long and magnificent unified process, which can be considered indigenous in its essential features—an incomparable attribute of the nobility of our origins.

Within the ethnic and cultural landscape of the peninsula—which is already taking shape at the dawn of history—numerous peoples appear, whose characteristics show, at times, a greater adherence to the traits of the indigenous tradition, and at other times, a syncretism in which the Aryan factor prevails.

Against the essentially unified backdrop of civilization and people that the Metal Age reveals throughout Italy—with those more or less backward enclaves and local aspects that are inherent in any unified phenomenon—the first historical cultures emerge, concretely distinguished by the existence of a tradition of written records: the civilizations of the Etruscans and the Hellenic colonies of southern Italy and Sicily.

With the Etruscans, an ethnic identity unique to Italy—and to no other people—came to maturity; this identity stemmed from characteristics common to the peoples of the peninsula and took root, flourished, and spread right here, where it was born.

Greek colonization, far from marking a rupture in the ethnic fabric of the Italian peoples, acted as a factor in an increasingly intimate development of this unity, because it created, across a vast area of Italy, a crucible for the transformation of the most illustrious historical civilization of the Mediterranean—the Greek civilization—offering it, already imbued with Italian elements, to the dissemination that would be brought about by the political unity of Rome.

The presence of Celts in Italy, which lasted little more than a century and a half, ultimately resulted in a deeper affirmation of the fundamental elements of the pre-existing population.

Rome had already been a typical and magnificent expression of this intimate interpenetration between the ethnos and civilization of the pre-existing populations and the superimposed Aryan element. It is undoubtedly very difficult to distinguish, within the cohesive figure of the Roman people and their civilization, the traits that derive from the foundation from which it emerged and those that constitute the contribution of the Aryan element, so profound was the syncretism that took place over many centuries between the Proto-Italic peoples—who had developed an advanced civilization on the peninsula over the millennia—and other peoples bringing diverse influences.

The people of Italy thus appear to us, upon their entry into history, as a unified people; this proves that certain select genetic characteristics—both physical and psychological—prevailed over the syncretism of diverse elements, which were nonetheless bound by elective affinity, giving rise to a superior human type. To the genetic principles it expresses physically—through the nobility of its features, the solidity and harmony of its physical structure, and its ever-responsive ability to adapt to various environmental conditions—and spiritually: through the productive qualities of the intellect, a clear and immediate

vision of reality, a keen ethical sense, and acute political and legal intuition—as creators and shapers of civil order—the Italian race owes its fundamental originality, which has never been lost throughout its varied, millennia-long history.

A synergy has developed between the race and its general, natural environment, making the Italian, throughout the ages, a distinctly distinct element within the framework of European life and civilization. This explains the succession on the peninsula of four distinct civilizations, all of a universal character and distinguished by a harmonious and lofty level of thought, all capable of producing from within their ranks human personalities of global significance—creators of historical eras, of which the Fascist era, owing to Mussolini's genius, is one of the most magnificent examples.

When Octavian organized the provinces of Italy administratively in 28 B.C., the system not only reflected a geographical distinctiveness—clearly perceived by Rome's realistic outlook—but also mirrored an ethnic unity rooted in the very distant past, stemming from the original unity of primitive peoples, which had been increasingly refined.

The invasions—which, from the fall of the Roman Empire through the entire Middle Ages, followed one another with varying intensity—passed by without having any effect on this adamantine and homogeneous bloc of Italians that Rome had tested. This is now one of the most certain findings of modern critical scholarship. Once their ephemeral political function ceased, their demographic elements either dissolved or were eliminated, as happened with the Arabs in Sicily; they remained as if encamped, clearly distinct from the local populations, and returned to Africa, leaving behind meager remnants that soon dwindled away.

The Jews, an alien ethnic group with a tendency toward disintegration, have always constituted a small minority that not only failed to undermine in any way, but did not even come close to affecting the biological and spiritual unity of the Italian race.

Italy's ethnic composition, the result of this long, millennia-spanning process, was clearly defined by the time Augustus established his order; and this still reflects, even today—some two millennia later—the fundamental structure of modern Italy.

The "German Question" in the Grand Council, as recorded in G. Bottai's Diary (March 21, 1939)

The German Question in the Grand Council. Mussolini had the confidential bulletin from *Cultura Popolare* on the foreign press read aloud, first by Alfieri and then by Buffarini. He followed the reading, emphasizing the passages with expressive gestures: irony, anger, boredom, disgust, and contempt flashed across his face. This creates a predefined mood that will set the tone for the discussion—if there is to be one at all.

Then, after the agenda is read, he launches into his speech. He begins from the very beginning, with the Treaty of Versailles. "Clemenceau realized that there were millions more Germans. What did he devise, then? To encircle Germany. He formed, around small, homogeneous ethnic nuclei, complex, heterogeneous ethnic groups: Czechoslovakia, in fact, Poland—with its more compact central core—Yugoslavia, which was also, let's not forget, directed against Italy, and so on." This contrivance could not last. "In 1921, I foresaw a Germany of 80 million." Demographic considerations: "Germany owes its strength to its relentless demographic growth, to the fertility of its women. Numbers are strength—I've said this many times. What are the Italians doing? Last year's recovery is already faltering. There's a decline in births."

“In 1933,” he says, “I made an attempt to channel the German revival through the Four-Power Pact. How was this pact received by the French press? With this description: ‘the butchers’ club,’ the ‘club des charcutiers.’ It was France that dismantled this mechanism for channeling Germany.”

“In 1935,” he continues, “there was Stresa, where an attempt was made to rein in German dynamism. At Stresa, it was already clear that we were preparing for the Abyssinian campaign. When they showed me the communiqué, which spoke of ‘world peace,’ I said to Flandin: ‘Let’s say “European peace”—let’s not make commitments that are too broad.’” And Flandin—that tall, apathetic Flandin—replied, ‘I understand. You don’t want to commit yourself because of Africa.’ What happened next? Sanctions. Is there anyone willing to forget the sanctions? I am certainly not that person.”

“And above all”—his voice grows loud and agitated here—“let’s stop talking about ‘morality’ in politics when it comes to relations between peoples. I want to make a cynical statement: in international relations, there is only one morality—success. We were immoral when we attacked the Negus. We won, and we became moral—extremely moral.”

“Germany was not satisfied with Munich. Himmler, I recall, said to me, showing me his saber: ‘If everything must be settled diplomatically, I ask what use this is to us... ” And besides, Czechoslovakia couldn’t hold out. People invoke respect for the signatures on treaties. Signatures represent the crystallization of certain aspects of a situation. If that situation changes, the signatures become null and void on their own.”

What are we being asked today? To abandon our friends? To do a waltz? I blush at the thought that anyone could still imagine Italy capable of doing a waltz.”

“The problem for us is another one. It’s the balance of power within the ‘Axis.’ The demographic balance has shifted in favor of the Germans, who will, however, one day recognize the mistake of having included three million Czechs in their compact bloc. Militarily, the ratios are as follows: Germany has twice as many divisions; our navy is twice the size of Germany’s; our air force outnumbers Germany’s by a ratio of 1 to 5; and our industrial capacity is 12 times that of Germany’s. Thus, the annexation of Czechoslovakia has altered the internal balance of the Axis in Germany’s favor. But we have a political advantage: we are the arbiters of the situation in Europe. Unless we want it, Germany will not be surrounded. That is our guarantee. Under these circumstances, France will not go to war. We must pursue the Axis’s policy with a serious and steadfast approach. No waltzing around.”

“Of course, when rumors began circulating about German intentions regarding Croatia, I called Mackensen and told him: ‘Let your government know that Croatia falls within the sphere of our policy; that the Adriatic is an Italian sea—and Italian alone.’ Mackensen turned pale. I must say that the Führer responded in a thoroughly satisfactory manner. If the Croatian question arises, we will be the ones to resolve it.”

“The Albanian problem is not urgent. It will come to a head when we want it to. We will tell the relevant authorities that our relations must be adjusted differently; and everything will be taken care of.”

“The Czechs have proven themselves to be a cowardly people. They are the Jews of the Slavs. They are a people corroded by these three evils: Freemasonry, democracy, and Bolshevism.”

“We have two opportunities to clarify our position: the speech to the Crown (this is the fourth time I’ve given it; I have experience with such compositions); and my speech to the squadristi on the 26th. I will state our demands to France. France will act as it sees fit.”

“A united front of democracies? Nothing will come of it. The United States will supply cannons for cash.”

“In short, we must raise our stature in the eyes of our Axis ally. When? Where? We’ll see.”

The repercussions of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War on the Italian population as seen by the prefects and the OVRA

a) Turin. August 30, 1936

And so firm has the resolve become to oppose the spread of the Bolshevik experiment (considered by some, despite the events in France and Spain, as an anarchist phenomenon destined for short-lived success in Latin countries) that a great many people would be in favor of Italian intervention on behalf of the insurgents and participation in the conflict, even through volunteers. This is also in response to the provocative attitude of the exiles.

This sentiment and this way of viewing the events in Spain are also shared by a large part of the working class.

On this matter, however, it would seem that indulging in excessive optimism would be an imprudent police strategy—and therefore not advisable.

Indeed, there is no shortage of those—though their number does not appear significant—who follow events in Spain with ill-concealed sympathy and restless curiosity, almost as if to draw from a possible victory of the communists a distant hope for what may be their dream of becoming die-hard subversives.

The behavior of the latter is being monitored and tracked with the utmost care so that we may intervene without delay and with the greatest vigor at the appropriate moment.

With regard to the latter, I refer to Report No. 022328 of July 7 of this year, concerning the attitude of subversives in relation to foreign situations.

b) Genoa. [date illegible] September 1936

The events in Spain have aroused in the general population of this province—more so than elsewhere—a sense of horror at the unheard-of barbarities learned not only from the press but also from the firsthand accounts of refugees, who have arrived in just over a month in numbers exceeding eleven thousand.

The vast majority of the Genoese population has condemned the savage political degeneration that has taken place in Spain, and by contrasting it with the order, discipline, and social justice that reign in Italy, has found reason to demonstrate even greater support for the Regime, participating en masse in the patriotic demonstrations that took place recently on the occasion of the repatriation from the AO of the various contingents of the Black Shirts of October 28.

There is, however, some concern that the events in Spain and the “ambiguous policy” of certain nations might provoke a conflagration. The people of Genoa, united and disciplined, are demonstrating even in these circumstances their faith in the foresight and wisdom of His Excellency the Head of Government, whose stirring address they listened to on the 30th in an atmosphere vibrant with enthusiasm and national pride.

Among the general population, the events in Spain do not appear to have had any significant repercussions, apart from those already mentioned, which have been evident through unequivocal expressions of loyalty.

As for the working class, it cannot be ruled out that the Spanish uprisings have stirred in a small minority—especially among the elderly—a nostalgia for times, ideologies, and systems now consigned to the past; however, this does not point to any premeditated aims of subversion.

Some signs of discontent stem primarily from the ongoing hardship experienced by a portion of the workers in this province due to wages—which are not yet universally commensurate with the cost of living—and due to frequent work stoppages caused by a lack of orders. However, this discontent has not yet resulted in any collective action and certainly will not do so.

A sporadic indication of any connection to the events in Spain occurred with the discovery of several typewritten anti-fascist leaflets, signed by a hypothetical “Mazzinian secret society,” calling on Italians to revolt against Fascism.

These leaflets, as has already been reported, were found inside some building entrances and in some mailboxes. Thorough investigations are still underway to identify the author; however, it is believed—based on reliable information—that the author is not a member of any organized anti-fascist group or cell, and it is not unlikely that the typewritten leaflets were smuggled in by the crews of ships flying foreign flags.

The working-class population is being closely monitored and surveilled through the extensive use of trusted informants and all available police resources. They remain disciplined and appear firmly integrated into the labor unions; therefore, as far as can be ascertained, any possible demonstrations can only be of an individual nature and will not escape immediate suppression by the Royal Police Headquarters and other relevant police agencies.

c) Milan. August 27, 1936

The impact that the events in Spain have had on public opinion has been reported by this Office through reports and numerous confidential briefings, transmitted from time to time to this Honorable Ministry, the Political Police Division, and the General and Confidential Affairs Division.

In this regard, I refer to my most recent letter, No. 10936, dated the 24th, and the confidential report on the street vendor, No. 5, dated the 26th of this month.

However, in compliance with the request set forth in the telegram in question, I have the honor to report that the repercussions of the events in Spain have manifested themselves in two distinct ways, and must therefore be considered as such.

Among the population loyal to the Fascist Regime and among law-abiding citizens in general, the unrest in Spain has instilled a sense of horror due to the unprecedented massacres that fill the news reports daily. Naturally, the sympathies of this segment of public opinion—which is by far the more numerous—lie with the Spanish nationalist forces, which have risen up to stem the tide of the leftist movement and the threatening Bolshevik terror.

Although there is no cause for excessive concern—since there is a clear sense of the stability of the regime in Italy under the enlightened and assured leadership of the Duce—the prevailing current of public opinion holds that a Bolshevik victory in Spain, in the event of a defeat of the Nationalist forces, could have, in the more or less near future, consequences and repercussions of unforeseeable scope, especially if the echo of such an outcome were to stimulate the dangerous tendency that has manifested itself in France to march in great strides toward the left. _

In conclusion, one can see a threat—albeit a distant one—from the Bolshevik danger, so persistently stirred up by Moscow and the Third International. And for this reason, the forces of law and order—which constitute the overwhelming majority of the country—are alert and ready to rally around the great Leader in all circumstances, in the struggle unfolding across the world between, on the one hand, the defense and strengthening of the highly civilized principle established by Fascism, and, on the other, the retrograde and violent system that Bolshevism seeks to assert.

Among the working class in general—those who are not loyal to the Regime, or who are not indifferent because they are apolitical, and in particular those holding subversive views—the events in Spain are viewed from an entirely different perspective, one that stands in stark contrast to the one outlined above.

The anti-fascist and subversive currents—among both the working class and non-working class—view the possible victory of the government forces in Spain and a potential Bolshevik triumph with sympathy and solidarity.

It should be noted that these currents constitute a small minority within the

of political forces, and therefore do not pose an immediate danger, provided they are properly monitored and contained.

Nevertheless, within these movements, the events in Spain have reawakened previously dormant intentions and hopes for a class-based uprising of the proletariat, especially since there is a widespread belief that a Bolshevik triumph in Spain would certainly lead to a similar outcome in the neighboring French Republic, whose political climate is already considered favorable and ripe for such a development.

As previously reported to the Honorable Ministry, the reports from this office’s agents are consistent in indicating that within local socialist and communist circles, efforts are being made to recruit individuals willing to enlist to fight in Spain—and possibly in France—but these reports, though consistent, have so far remained general in nature, and no names of potential recruits have been provided.

It has also been reported that individuals have presented themselves at the local Spanish Consulate to enlist for the aforementioned purpose. However, the Consul, to avoid any compromise and given doubts about a possible victory by the nationalist insurgent forces, reportedly declined the offer and left

to take leave.

Finally, it has been reported—albeit on a confidential basis—that a Communist Party official arrived in Milan carrying numerous false passports to be handed over to subversives leaving the country to join the Spanish cause; however, news of the large-scale preventive arrests carried out by this office, pursuant to ministerial orders, is said to have alarmed the official, who reportedly hurried to leave Milan.

So far, therefore, as far as we can tell, there has been no specific action or implementation of covert plans in connection with the events in Spain, but only the emergence of public opinion, with predictions, intentions, or hopes in one direction or another, as mentioned above.

I assure Your Excellency that this office is following this matter with the utmost attention, and Your Excellency will be informed of any relevant developments.

d) Milan. [date illegible] August 1936

It cannot be said that the events in Spain have had any repercussions here.

They are, however, being followed with growing interest as the final phase of the war between the left-wing parties and the Nationalists draws nearer.

Among industrial, financial, commercial, and professional circles—that is, among the bourgeoisie—the ferocity with which the anarchist rabble, which has now gained the upper hand even over the Republican government itself, is raging against institutions and individuals, destroying churches and slaughtering clergy and opponents, arouses a deep sense of horror and condemnation.

In these circles, there is no attempt to hide a strong sympathy for General Franco's troops, and hopes are being expressed for a Falangist victory, since there is a distinct feeling that the defeat of the insurgents would lead to a Bolshevik government in Spain, which would easily spread to neighboring France.

Workers in general, for the most part, share these sentiments; they regard the ferocity and atrocities of the Iberian subversives as an attack not only on religion but also on peace and social order: indeed, they cannot help but contrast the disciplined tranquility of our country with the anarchy reigning in Spain and looming in France, and they cannot help but take satisfaction in the measures taken by the Fascist Regime, not least those concerning wages.

The various currents of anti-fascism, on the other hand, are ideologically close to the government forces and hope that, with the latter's triumph, an anti-fascist "popular front" will emerge that will exert its tangible influence in Italy as well: they refrain, however—and I am not speaking of propaganda—from merely expressing their feelings or, worse still, from adopting attitudes or engaging in any demonstrations that might be interpreted as an expression of solidarity with the "popular front."

Bologna. August 30, 1936

With reference to Ministerial Telegram No. 441/28419 of the 28th of this month, I have the honor of reporting to Your Excellency what my agency has been able to ascertain regarding the repercussions of the events in Spain within the Kingdom:

Given that public opinion is, in general, deeply concerned by the current unrest in Spain, it can be stated, with a clear spirit of objectivity, that the majority—comprising the sound segment of the population—views the “nationalist and military forces” with sympathy, which are striving to restore order, and is seething with indignation over the atrocities committed by the communists and anarchists. This indignation is particularly evident in ecclesiastical circles and religious communities, both in the city and in the countryside.

Right-thinking individuals and countless citizens frequently compare—often with a sense of national pride—today’s disciplined Italy with the various European countries torn apart by political upheaval. And a sense of broad and confident trust in the regime’s policies is expressed, particularly among intellectuals and in the business and industrial sectors.

Among the masses of workers, a truly keen interest in the outcome of the Spanish revolution has gradually taken hold. Signs of this are easily detected almost everywhere: passionate reading of newspaper reports on the uprisings; lively comments and discussions during work breaks, both inside and outside the factories; groups of workers gathering in front of newsstands, especially in the afternoon, when the evening editions announce the day’s events with eye-catching headlines; conversations in the evenings in cafés and taverns, with a tendency to listen not only to the radio but also to biased voices of all kinds. There are quite a few workers who predict the triumph of the “Reds” and dream of distant mirages even in Italy.

Indeed, according to information gathered, the conviction is gaining ground among them that, following the victory of the Communists in Spain, a Bolshevik regime would soon be established in France.

Having thus gained important positions, Russia—through its “Comintern”—would extend its tentacles elsewhere.

A much smaller group among the workers consists of communists, old-school socialists or their sympathizers, and anti-fascists in general: a dangerous group in that it is rekindling a dormant faith within itself and tends to spread it, exploiting the easy enthusiasm for the absurd Soviet paradise, stirring up certain temporary hardships, and gathering pretexts of every kind.

Various signs of these pernicious efforts are evident.

A few communist graffiti—some containing phrases glorifying proletarian Spain—have appeared in the province of Livorno (at the “ILVA” plant in Piombino); in the province of Massa; and in Ferrara. Several workers have been arrested in recent days in Lucca, Reggio Emilia, and Prato for defeatist statements regarding the events in Spain.

Even in Bologna, although no obvious signs have appeared, the impression has been gained that, especially in the large factories (such as the one in Casaralta), suspicious elements are lurking, stirring up the spirits of their fellow workers.

Even in some sectors of the construction workforce, a trend that is by no means clear regarding the Spanish uprisings appears to be taking shape, perhaps as a result of some agitators exploiting the current hardship of the unemployed workforce and the general interest in current political events.

As for the identification and arrest of subversives—who are attempting to stir up trouble—and of those who generally disrupt public order, my agency has long since launched active and extensive investigations and will, as soon as possible, take the necessary decisive action, particularly in Bologna and the province of Modena.

With the utmost respect.

f) Bologna. [date illegible] August 1936

The tragic events in Spain are being followed with keen interest by the population of this province and are the subject of discussion across all social classes.

The horrifying acts of brutality committed by the Spanish communists and the constant offense they inflict upon religious and human sentiments have had—and continue to have—a widespread and profound impact on public opinion, particularly among the law-abiding segment of the citizenry, which, as lovers of order and discipline, are also zealous guardians of their sincerely professed religious faith.

There was some concern when diplomatic incidents occurred with our government and that of the Reich. The firm stance taken by the Royal Government on that occasion met with unanimous approval, and now the public feels that, following the imposition by nearly all European states of an embargo on military supplies destined for Spain, the conflict remains confined to that nation; consequently, they follow the events of that atrocious civil war with a certain degree of calm, while not failing to seize every opportunity to express their heartfelt sympathy for General Franco's insurgents, since it is their hope to see Spanish communism eradicated through the victory of the Nationalists.

But the struggle tearing Spain apart is also followed with keen interest by the few communists in the province, who anxiously track the shifting fortunes of the Red troops and hope for a decisive victory by the Spanish government forces, in the hope of a broader affirmation of their principles.

Undoubtedly contributing to the reawakening of these elements' long-dormant ideologies are the letters arriving from France and Spain, which are marked, for the most part, by enthusiastic praise of the events in Spain and the recent successes achieved in France.

It has also been observed that, whereas until recently the subversives read in the newspapers almost exclusively—or primarily—sports news, they now, on the contrary, devote all their attention to reports on Spanish events; and as soon as they open the newspaper, they read with keen interest and comment, according to their own views, the latest news reported by the press; and when the newspapers do not publish new reports on events in Spain, they venture to speculate that their communist comrades have scored some victory over the Nationalists and that, for this reason, the fascist press remains silent.

In their friendly conversations, workers who are not loyal to the Regime—albeit with great caution—discuss the benefits that the triumph of communism would bring them, the consequences of which have already been felt in Italy as well, to the extent that the Fascist government was prompted to raise workers' wages on its own initiative to prevent economic hardship from being exploited for propaganda against the Regime.

Nevertheless, there have been no demonstrations of any kind that might indicate a resurgence of subversive propaganda, although there are reports that among communist elements there is a certain sense of tension as they await the outcome of the struggle in Spain, which would mark the achievement

of a new goal for them.

On the whole, nearly the entire population is following the unfolding events in Spain with anxiety—I would say almost with bated breath—and, while hoping for the triumph of the national forces out of a commendable spirit of self-preservation, is well aware that Italy is currently governed by a Man who is a sure guarantee of its inevitable destiny and who would never allow any poisonous communist infiltration.

Nevertheless, police action is entirely focused on monitoring treacherous elements and is ready to crush with severity and rigor any attempt—not to mention an insurrection, which is far removed from the overall conditions of order and

public spirit, but of any attempt at propaganda or activity hostile to the National Regime.

g) Florence. [date illegible] August 1936

With regard to telegrams No. 28177/441 and No. 28419/441, dated the 22nd and 28th of this month, respectively, I have the honor to report that the events in Spain are being followed with keen interest by the people of this province across all social classes.

The civil war on the Iberian Peninsula, with its methods of brutal, murderous, and destructive cruelty perpetrated by the communist parties, has aroused deep horror among these populations from a humanitarian standpoint, and this horror has been and continues to be felt by everyone, even those who, while remaining loyal to the institutions, have been unable to forget the ideologies of the parties to which they belonged before the Fascist Revolution.

From a political standpoint—as a struggle between the Fascist Ideal and communism—nearly the entire population, intellectuals and workers alike, fervently hopes for the victory of the Spanish Fascists over the communists, as the beginning of the end of communism in the world.

The clergy, for its part, being directly affected, contributes through religious ceremonies in churches and public prayers by the faithful to an effective campaign against the red madness emanating from Moscow.

It should be noted that within this jurisdiction there are two extremely important labor centers: Prato and Empoli, where, prior to the March on Rome, the theories of the left-wing parties had spread considerably, and that throughout the province there was no shortage of numerous and militant Masonic lodges, which had arisen primarily because the Grand Master of the Justinian Order, the late Torrigiani, was Tuscan.

This historical situation, despite 14 years of a heated fascist climate, has left a lingering residue in the minds of a few deluded individuals, which is resurfacing at this moment in Europe marked by the struggle between fascism and communism—albeit with the utmost caution—through sporadic, rare individual acts that manage to evade any control.

It is evident, in fact, that certain individuals who are notoriously anti-fascist in the general sense of the word—or who belong to the dissolved left-wing parties in particular—are following news of the defeats of the Spanish Reds with some apprehension and are hoping for their victory. These, I repeat, are deeply held personal sentiments that are not expressed outwardly for fear of just punishment.

The most astute in this regard are those few—very few—intellectuals from the outdated Freemasonry who have been unable to acclimate to the Fascist environment and who have lost the ability to rule, as they once did, hidden in the shadows of the lodges.

Among workers with anti-fascist sentiments, on the other hand, there have been a few outward manifestations, which were immediately identified and suppressed, as evidenced by the reports sent from time to time to this Honorable Ministry: however, as stated above, these are sporadic and individual instances.

All police agencies, with an admirable spirit of investigative initiative, combined with a sense of profound fascist humanity, are closely monitoring public sentiment to identify and immediately quell any outbreak of anti-fascist demonstrations; consequently, one can confidently rely, at any moment in the life of the nation, not only on discipline but also on the highest sense of patriotism among the people of this province, who are deeply responsive to the Regime's comprehensive and effective measures for the people.

h) * * Rome. August 30, 1936

Events in Spain are being followed everywhere in this province with obvious keen interest, and everywhere they arouse waves of horror among the people at the brutality that characterizes the actions of the Reds.

It can be safely stated that everyone sincerely hopes for the victory of the Falangists, whom they would indeed like to see supported by every possible means in the struggle they have undertaken.

This sentiment of solidarity with the forces opposing the spread of Bolshevik barbarism is confirmed by the harsh criticism directed at the French government's stance—specifically, its tolerance of the underhanded maneuvers aimed at providing substantial aid to the Spanish Reds— and in the sympathy with which Germany's actions—decidedly and openly aimed at guarding against any potential Bolshevik danger—are instead viewed.

If the struggles in Spain have had—and continue to have—repercussions on public sentiment, these can be summed up in the people's unanimous recognition of the precious tranquility that the Fascist regime has ensured for them, allowing them to compare, with pride and dignity, life in Italy with the troubled existence not only of blood-soaked Spain but also of other nations.

This does not, however, rule out the possibility that among the few subversive elements—especially communists—the events in Spain may have given rise to some hope, which, however, has not in fact manifested itself in any way.

i) Avezzano.

August 31, 1936

I am pleased to inform Your Excellency that the events in Spain have had varying repercussions on the population, depending on the principles of the individual groups. Thus, while for those citizens who are more deeply committed to religion, the massacres and acts of violence committed there have evoked a sense of horror and abhorrence, the vast majority of Fascist citizens are following with anxiety and

trepidation the counteroffensive and the acts of heroism carried out by the ranks of the Falangists.

Among subversive elements, the civil war in Spain has generated a stir that must be closely monitored and promptly suppressed. Long-time subversives who had long been dormant in political circles—even avoiding contact with their ideological comrades—are now, as if awakened, showing clear signs of activity. They assiduously read reports of events in Spain, express delight at the massacre carried out by those subversives, and hope that similar days may soon come to Italy.

They are convinced that victory will smile upon the extremists, leading to the advent of Bolshevism, which will then spread to France. And so, with the help of these two great Bolshevized nations and that of Russia, they hope in the near future to be able to rise up and revolt in Italy to crush Fascism.

With these convictions and this agenda, the most daring among them do not fail to spread propaganda —albeit cautiously—among the masses.

The incidents that occurred in the municipalities of Caprarola (Viterbo) and Terni—where numerous arrests have already been made—constitute clear confirmation of what I have outlined above.

Therefore, the police must take intensive and vigilant action to nip any outbreak of activity in the bud.

For my part, and in accordance with the orders I received verbally from Your Excellency, I am taking steps to intensify covert operations; specifically in Terni—a highly significant industrial center—I will ensure that a capable agent is placed in every major factory as soon as possible.

Respectfully.

Bari—August 27, 1936

There is no doubt that interest in events in Spain is growing day by day among the working masses, a fact already observed particularly in Taranto due to the large number of workers there.

Among subversives, this interest takes on downright obsessive forms, to the point that at work, in cafés, while out walking—everywhere—people discuss nothing but the “Popular Front” and the prospects it faces as a result of current events.

Faced with such an evident state of affairs, the authorities are trying to protect themselves by conducting sudden searches at the Royal Arsenal—searches that consistently yield negative results. However, while this measure fails to intimidate anyone, it is interpreted by the mass of workers as a sign of alarm on the part of the police, leading to the erroneous belief that a broad communist movement exists.

A peculiar way of reasoning stemming from the frenzy of the moment!

What is certain is that no one has dared so far to take any initiative whatsoever, despite the heightened state of agitation from which some of the most troublemaking individuals might profit by committing some rash individual or collective act.

In any case, the most radical workers at the Royal Arsenal and the Tosi shipyard have recently been identified, and I will not fail to contact the Chief of Police in Taranto immediately to put a definitive stop to their radical subversive activities.

And to give an idea of the level of agitation reached, I will mention, among others, two young communists:

1) Angelo Carucci, son of Giuseppe and Livia Semeraro, born in Martina Franca on April 21, 1909, a designer;

2) Antonio Ghiara, son of Annibaie and Elisabetta Caputo, born on June 13, 1909, in Bari, a machinist.

Both are employed at the Royal Arsenal, and the informant describes them as young, intelligent, and capable—and, given the respect they command among their peers, able to influence the masses.

They have now taken concrete steps to form a core group of eager young people to be guided toward the study of political and economic theories, with the aim of acquiring a mastery of revolutionary ideas and experience to be put into action at the opportune moment. In the meantime, they have commissioned a bookseller to procure various books of this kind.

What has been said regarding the working-class masses in Taranto in general applies, to a lesser extent, to the other provinces in the area and with greater emphasis to the province of Bari, where subversive elements are more abundant.

In fact, the recent arrest of the well-known communist Nicola Capriuolo, son of Samuele, and of his comrades Giovanni De Giglio, son of Raffaele, and Giovanni Battiston, son of Giammaria—the subject of ongoing Report No. 00631, dated the 22nd, for subversive propaganda in Bari's public parks, even among strangers—is clear evidence of the feverish fervor to which they are succumbing in the face of events in Spain.

That said, I have a duty to assure you that the agency of the 3rd Zone is monitoring with the utmost attention, through agents and informants, every movement and every act of the subversives—all of whom have been identified—and is prepared for any eventuality, as well as to carry out whatever orders Your Excellency may see fit to issue.

m) Bari.

August 31, 1936

Further to my report No. 00636 dated the 27th of this month, I assure Your Excellency that, the following day, contact with the Chief of Police of Taranto, to whom—in addition to having highlighted the actual state of mind of the masses in general and of the subversives in particular, resulting from the repercussions of the events in Spain and reported to this agency by informants in daily contact with the workers for common labor-related reasons—I also presented a list of the most radical subversives assigned to that Royal Arsenal and the Tosi Shipyard, for whatever measures he deemed appropriate to propose in order to curb their subversive activities.

I had the impression, however, that the information provided to the Chief of Police of Taranto by his

confidant did not match my own, so much so that he cited as evidence and as an example the well-known communist Edoardo Voccoli, son of Lorenzo, who had, in fact, expressed himself in an optimistic and favorable manner toward the Spanish nationalists.

From this detail, it became clear that Voccoli, fearing he was dealing with a suspicious individual, did not honestly express his true thoughts; consequently, the information obtained by the Taranto police authorities does not reflect the actual state of affairs there, given that Voccoli's consistent subversive attitude is also well known.

For my part, I therefore confirm—as I told my colleague in Taranto—that the working-class masses' heightened interest in the events in Spain has reached a level that subversives consider pathologically excessive.

I am enclosing the list of the aforementioned subversives from Taranto.

This also applies in relation to Your Excellency's telegram No. 28419/441 of yesterday.

n) Caltanissetta.

August 31, 1936

In response to the aforementioned telegraphic circular, I have the honor to report to this Honorable Ministry that the events in Spain are being followed in this province by people of all social classes and categories with particular interest. Those with sound political judgment express regret over the fratricidal war being waged in Spain and over the acts of cruelty committed—and continuing to be committed—by the government's Red Army and the extremist parties of that nation, which are spreading desolation and terror. They therefore hope that General Franco's National Army will soon prevail over the government's forces—which they wish to see definitively defeated—so that Bolshevism, which aims to completely conquer Spain, may be routed.

The news, therefore, reported by both the radio and the newspapers, captivates the public and is received with varying degrees of satisfaction depending on whether it is more or less favorable to General Franco's army.

Among the working class, however—particularly among those who, before the advent of Fascism, held subversive and especially communist views—a contrary reaction is evident: namely, a certain satisfaction with the war being fought in Spain; they receive news favorable to the Red Army with tacit, cautious satisfaction, hoping that final victory will crown its efforts and that the reestablished authority of the government may lead to greater development and a broader affirmation of Bolshevism in Europe.

No demonstration of any kind—which would undoubtedly be promptly suppressed—has even been remotely hinted at, with the few sympathizers of the current Spanish government limiting themselves to expressing a few generic words of approval for the resistance it is offering to the national movement led by General Franco.

In any case, I assure this Honorable Ministry that surveillance of such elements remains highly active and uninterrupted, and I will not fail to report with due promptness anything I deem worthy of particular importance.

o) Trapani. [date illegible]

I have sought information from various sources to form my own personal opinion of what the people think of the Spanish Revolution. It seems they are showing very little interest in it!

There may also be an economic reason behind this.

It is well known that Spain is the strongest competitor of Trapani in the salt and fish-in-oil industries. The fact that at least some of the Spanish producers are in disarray benefits the Trapani industry, and the workers at the salt flats and the companies that prepare fish in oil know and understand this very well; indeed, they expect to derive some benefit from it.

8.

Mussolini's Personality and Politics According to a Study by a French Diplomat (January 1938)

M. BLONDEL, CHARGÉ D'AFFAIRES OF FRANCE IN ROME, TO M. DELBOS, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS.

Rome, January 27, 1938

In his most interesting dispatch No. 1836 of last November 18, our ambassador in Berlin wondered what the legal basis for Italian-German relations was from that point forward and whether there was reason to believe that, despite all official denials, a secret treaty had been concluded between the two countries. Mr. François Poncet commented in this regard on a most curious study published by Mr. von Freytagh-Loringhoven in the journal *Völkerbund und Völkerrecht* and titled, in keeping with the Wagnerian inspirations of the Third Reich, *The Twilight of the Treaties*.

I asked one of my colleagues to investigate what, in the writings, speeches, and, of course, the actions of the Italian head of government, might provide us with useful insights into Mr. Mussolini's thinking regarding both the practice and the very concept of alliances. Mr. Jean-Paul Garnier has set forth below the reasons why the conclusions of our ambassador in Berlin correspond to the view that one can form in Rome regarding the nature of the collaboration between Germany and Italy, and he has sought to highlight the guiding principles that seem to inspire the Duce in matters of foreign policy.

When one seeks to study Mussolini's personality, there is no publication analogous to *Mein Kampf*. The head of the Italian government has never felt the need to define his ideas and views as Chancellor Hitler did in his book. Undoubtedly, the Duce has delivered countless speeches, some of which have had the impact that Rome is aware of, and he is the author of many newspaper articles written in that vehement and combative style that is characteristic of him. One can glean here and there from the complete collection of *Scritti e Discorsi* information worth noting, but these are always fragmentary indications. Although there is an increasing tendency to celebrate him as a sort of superman, Mr. Mussolini has not yet deigned to reveal the new gospel to his people. He has limited himself to defining what his creed should be.

Mr. Mussolini seems to have condensed the essence of his political thought into the doctoral dissertation in law that, on the advice of Mr. Grandi, he decided to defend before the faculty of Bologna in April 1924. Although he had already been Prime Minister for a year and a half, the Duce chose to

dedicate his work to Machiavelli, whom he intended to praise and continue to rehabilitate. The work—which, incidentally, consisted of only about fifteen pages written in a rather hasty, particularly violent, and even outrageous manner—is now virtually impossible to find, and the official version is that the dissertation was ultimately never completed, which is inaccurate. In any case, we still have the *Prelude to Machiavelli*, which was published at the time by the journal *Gerarchia* and never made it into circulation. Generally speaking, one cannot overemphasize the considerable influence that the major works of the famous Florentine secretary exerted on the mind of Mr. Mussolini and his immediate entourage, as well as on the intellectual development of the new generations of Fascists destined to provide the leadership of tomorrow's Italy. The theorist of pure raison d'état obviously contributed more than anyone else—along with Georges Sorel and Nietzsche, and to a lesser extent Péguy, Renan, and Bergson—to the formation of the Duce, a fact he himself acknowledged. Did he not, in fact, declare to the German writer Emil Ludwig, in his own words: "My father would read *The Prince* to us in the evening as we warmed ourselves by what remained of the fire in the forge while drinking our local wine. When I reread it at the age of forty, the book still had such a powerful effect on me."

Let us therefore examine what repercussions ideas so closely resembling those of a Florentine born at the end of the fifteenth century might have on the conduct of a modern statesman, both in domestic politics and in foreign affairs.

Domestic Policy.

"Many," wrote Machiavelli, "have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in reality." Fascism, for its part, did not claim to represent an ideal form of government—toward which the aspirations of the masses would more or less vaguely tend—but rather to be a living reality. The doctrine is fundamentally anti-individualist, subordinating everything to the State; the State "is not a night watchman concerned solely with the personal safety of citizens; nor is it an organization whose purely material aims consist in guaranteeing a certain level of well-being and a relatively peaceful coexistence among social classes... It is a spiritual and moral entity. It is the guarantor of internal and external security, as well as the custodian of the spirit of the people—which it has forged over the centuries and which it, in turn, transmits. The State is not only present but also past and future; transcending the brief limits of individual lives, it constitutes the immanent consciousness of the nation." l.

Citizens, who generally seek only to satisfy their appetites and particular interests, are therefore, to a certain extent, in at least a virtual and latent state of rebellion against the State, which must bring them back onto the right path through coercion, since they are fundamentally evil, according to the author of *The Prince*: "Men never do any good except out of necessity, but where freedom abounds and there is room for action, everything is immediately filled with confusion and disorder."

For his part, Mr. Mussolini fully subscribes to Machiavelli's fundamentally pessimistic judgment on human nature: "Perhaps I should make it even harsher," he says, adding: "I maintain that Machiavelli's doctrine is alive today, more than four centuries later, because while the outward aspects of our lives have changed, the shifts in the minds of individuals and peoples have not proved to be very profound..."

Under these conditions, democracy cannot, for Mussolini as for Machiavelli, constitute a satisfactory form of government, since it rests on the crowd and the masses. Oh, "the people often desire their own ruin. The multitude, left to its own devices, is weak and vile. Republics are often incapable of making

the necessary decisions; their customary institutions move slowly (since no council or magistrate can act on its own and, in many matters, depends on one another, and this agreement of wills requires time); moreover, their remedies are very perilous when they must address something that cannot wait. As for men, when they are well governed, they neither seek nor desire other freedoms."

Such, at least, is the opinion of the Florentine secretary and, without a doubt, that of the Duce as well. For both of them, the supreme good—the paradise they dream of on earth—is a well-ordered state! The motto of Fascism will remain: "Everything for the people, not by the people." The state is "Fame of Fame." It needs no justification, for it carries its own mystique within itself. It does not live for individuals; rather, it is they who must live for it. What is good for the blacksmith's son from Predappio, as for the collaborator of the Most Serene Republic, is what is useful to the State, and evil is what is harmful to it. The famous Florentine will call patriotism, civic-mindedness, and respect for the law "goodness," and the pursuit of personal satisfactions that are useless or harmful to the community "wickedness." "The State, as a universal ethical will, creates the law," writes Mr. Mussolini. It is therefore not subject to any moral stipulation, for it stands above them. The end not only justifies but demands the means. These means, whatever they may be, are not subject to the rules of honor. The only law in politics is to succeed. The duty of the "Prince" is therefore not to act according to abstract principles or inspired by a noble ideal, but to conform to the true laws that govern the world.

The art of governing consists in knowing how to utilize all the intellectual and material efforts of individuals, channeling and absorbing all their energies. To attain power, one must know how to make the appropriate concessions, without allowing oneself to be held back by scruples that can only paralyze action. As Count Sforza so aptly points out in his book *The Builders of Modern Europe*, when Italy was in the throes of a Bolshevik crisis, Mr. Mussolini was careful not to clash head-on with the labor movement. On the contrary, he began by flattering and following it. In the early days of the factory occupations, he wrote under his own signature: "The workers must not abandon their position until they have obtained guarantees," and one is inevitably led to think of that passage from *The Discourses* where Machiavelli philosophically states: "I believe it is very rare, if not impossible, to rise from a mediocre rank to a very high one without resorting to force or bad faith, unless one achieves it through heredity or endowment."

Mr. Mussolini, having reached the pinnacle of power, gave life to this myth, to this religion of the totalitarian nation—the supreme goal and sole justification for all human activity—of which Machiavelli was the prophet. Did not Machiavelli himself, in a letter to Guichardin, already write: "I love my country more than my own soul"? There exists among these two Italians, separated by more than four centuries, the same underlying sentimentality—admittedly quite peculiar—which leads both to devote all the resources of their intellect and their vitality to the service of their shared passion: the country. The Duce could say, like his mentor, and no doubt with just as much reason: "Chance has made it so that, knowing nothing of the art of silk, nor of the art of wool, nor of gains nor losses, it falls to me to reason about the State."

Religion, as Napoleon had already intended, would also be placed at the service of the regime: "which is Catholic but above all fascist—exclusively, essentially fascist." At the time of the Abyssinian War, military mobilization was accompanied, so to speak, by a mobilization of consciences carried out under the auspices of the Church. And the *Tribuna* of December 20, 1935, wrote: "This is the first time that the episcopate and the clergy have intervened openly and effectively in a political issue in which Italy is involved. At last there is an Italian episcopate and clergy who know, when the occasion arises, how to place the authority deriving from the high office they hold at the service of national interests."

Just recently, we saw 2,000 priests and 60 bishops go to cheer the head of government in Venice's main square and then march, carrying flags and in almost military formations, past the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The guidance of the nation continues in this sphere as in others, and in the event of war, the role as a moral force assigned by the Duce to the Italian clergy will not be negligible. Thus, none of the forces at the nation's disposal will be lost.

What are the dangers that threaten to corrupt the state, in the view of Machiavelli—and of Mussolini, both of whom passionately seek to reawaken the hearts of their fellow citizens by drawing on the sources of ancient Rome and its past greatness? An excessively prolonged state of peace, the country's excessive gentleness, its extreme fertility, an easy life, stark social inequality, the great wealth of many individuals contrasting with the poverty of the masses, and finally, the lack of central authority in the face of the ambitions of the powerful. An iron fist is therefore necessary to ensure order and maintain the nation's cohesion: "Dictatorial authority did both good and harm to the Roman Republic, but the authority that citizens usurp for themselves rather than receiving it through free elections is harmful to civic life."

The Fascist militiamen of Imola had this maxim by Machiavelli engraved on the sword of honor they presented to Mr. Mussolini in 1924: "States are not maintained by words." There is no doubt that the Duce was deeply convinced of the truth of this axiom, he who concluded his article on the author of *The Prince* with this quotation: "... All armed prophets triumphed, and the unarmed perished. Because the nature of peoples is changeable, and it is easy to persuade them of something but difficult to keep them in that persuasion. And for this reason, it is necessary to be organized in such a way that when they no longer believe, they can be made to believe by force. Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus would not have been able to ensure long-term observance of their constitutions if they had been unarmed."

The present era is obviously rich in armed prophets, starting with Mr. Mussolini himself. In this regard, neither Chancellor Hitler, nor Mr. Stalin, nor President Atatürk have anything to envy him, and the shadow of Marshal Pilsudski still looms over the entire political life of Poland—to name only the principal European dictators.

Foreign Policy.

Mr. Mussolini is like the author of *The Prince*, inspired by a desire for realism and a passion for Romanism. One finds in him a keen need for lucidity that shrinks neither from cynicism nor from brutality. Both men derive a sort of dark joy from shattering the sentimental illusions in which nations like to lull themselves, by bringing into full light the true—and so often unappealing—face of the raison d'état, which is, in the final analysis, nothing more than that of force. Mr. Mussolini is exasperated by the almost inevitable contradiction that exists, at least to some extent, between the vital needs of peoples and the ideal they claim to pursue. Thus, the more or less successful efforts made by democracies to harmonize the principles they espouse with the permanent national interests they are charged with safeguarding elicit nothing but derision and contempt from him. He believes he discerns in this evidence of what he considers the monstrous hypocrisy of the Western powers. Here, in particular, lies one of the persistent reasons for the difficulties in an Italian-British understanding. In Rome, there remains a suspicion that Great Britain harbors the most sinister designs, and the attempts by the London cabinet to reconcile its sentimental scruples with its imperial interests reveal to Italians a new level of bad faith and systematic insincerity on the part of "Perfidious Albion." "We do not speak the same language," Count Ciano will tell the British ambassador, so great is the difference in their mentalities. For the Duce, as for Machiavelli, "when it comes to the salvation of the fatherland, one

must not give any consideration to what is just or unjust." That alone matters; that is the reality. There is no other reality. The rest is mere verbiage, nonsense, good at best for stalling and filling space.

The gospel of pacifism was preached after the war to crowds eager for hope by generous and truly realistic statesmen, but the material foundation of their mission was not sufficient for it to triumph over insurmountable resistance. When France ceased to be Europe's sole major military power, its ideas no longer garnered the nearly universal support they had enjoyed at the outset. Such is, for the head of the Italian government, the striking demonstration of the profound truth of Machiavelli's famous phrase, which I cited above regarding the unarmed prophets. For his part, the Duce never believed in complete pacifism. As early as 1920, he exclaimed in Trieste: "There will be no period of peace until peoples surrender to a Christian reawakening of universal brotherhood and are able to reach out to one another across oceans and mountains. For my part, I do not place too much faith in this ideal..."2.

Later, he would add: "Fascism does not believe in the possibility or the usefulness of perpetual peace." He rejects this pacifism, which conceals a renunciation of struggle and a cowardice in the face of sacrifice. Only war brings all human energies to their highest tension and imprints a seal of nobility on the peoples who have the courage to face it.[3] And when we see him, in his speech in Bologna, offering peace to the world, it will be "amidst a forest of 8 million bayonets"! Moreover, is the fascist state not, above all, "a will to power and empire"? "The Roman tradition is, in this regard, an idea of strength." In the doctrine of fascism, the Empire is not merely a territorial, military, or commercial expression, but a spiritual and moral one. One can conceive of an empire—that is, a nation that, directly or indirectly, guides other nations without the need to conquer a single square kilometer of territory. For fascism, the aspiration to empire—that is, to the expansion of nations—is a manifestation of vitality; its opposite, the homebody mentality, is a sign of decadence. Peoples who are emerging or being reborn are imperialist; peoples who are dying are resigned. Fascism is the doctrine best suited to represent the tendencies and state of mind of a people who, like the Italian people, are being reborn after long centuries of neglect or foreign servitude."

In the Senate[4], as early as 1926, the head of government declared: "I believe that peoples… if they wish to live, must develop a certain will to power; otherwise, they vegetate, eke out a meager existence, and will fall prey to a stronger people who have developed this will to power more fully within themselves."

Thus, an armed, virile peace, as they say here. The nation must not give up but must be kept on its toes, at the cost of the greatest efforts, so as to always be in a position, should the need arise, to face its destiny. Hence this formidable armaments program that we see being developed and pursued with astonishing consistency. Mr. Mussolini knows very well that his country is very poor and that it is difficult for it, relying solely on its own resources, to play a leading role in world politics. Therefore, he maximizes Italy's potential by equipping the nation with an army far superior to that of the prewar era, a strong and capable navy, and an excellent air force. In this way, he increases Fascist Italy's capacity to inflict harm so that it can make its voice heard abroad and realize its objectives to the extent possible. Like the voters of Brandenburg in the past, he is forging a military instrument designed to enhance the value of any potential alliance. And it is precisely because, despite everything, he harbors some doubts about the quality of his "human resources" that he devotes all his efforts to strengthening the capabilities of his technical forces, navy, and air force, for he is well aware that in this way he becomes complementary to the Reich and can provide it with elements that it still lacks to a certain extent: "Truly powerful republics and princes do not buy friendships with money but with virtue and the reputation of their strength... When a state conducts itself in such a way that its neighbors, in order to gain its friendship, become its tributaries, then this is a sure sign that the state is powerful; but when its

neighbors—even those weaker than itself—profit from it, then this is a sign of great weakness."5

For Machiavelli, the very law of life is movement. "To be virtuous is to will and know how to act." Mr. Mussolini hates nothing more than immobility. "We are not, nor do we wish to be, eternally immobile mummies, our faces turned toward the same horizon," he wrote on November 15, 1914, in *Popolo d'Italia*. And in his interview with Emil Ludwig, he expressed it this way: "The negative, the eternal immobility, is damnation. I am for movement. I am a being on the move." Thus, the Duce rebels against France's efforts to permanently freeze the current configuration of Europe. He finds it absurd to try to stop the world in motion. It is not without reason that these words of Mr. Mussolini were engraved in Budapest: "Treaties are not eternal." The dynamism that lies at the very foundation of fascism stands in direct opposition to this somewhat static view of things that the complacent great democracies are trying to impose on humanity. The head of the Italian government—who is all desire, all impatience—and is undoubtedly quite different in this respect from Chancellor Hitler—embodies, on the contrary, the appetites, desires, and demands of the new forces.

When he gets the impression that people are trying to stall for time, to wear him down, based on the assumption that democracies are eternal and constitute definitive regimes, whereas dictatorships are ephemeral and, in short, represent nothing more than temporary expedients, Mr. Mussolini becomes deeply irritated. He believes, like Machiavelli, that systematically seeking to take advantage of the passage of time "is the hallmark of false wisdom and proof of a genuine indecision that vainly seeks to conceal itself." Therefore, he will strive to prove that, far from resolving matters, time—when one has failed to conclude the necessary agreements when the moment arose—only exacerbates the situation and distances the prospects for reconciliation. The Duce will thus, almost naively, it would seem, grant the great powers a certain deadline for carrying out the actions he deems necessary. And he will respond to the failure to meet these expectations with measures whose sole result will be to further strain international relations. The less he is granted, the more his demands grow. To obtain even a minimum that is denied him, he will attempt excessive ventures if necessary, for "one very often obtains through impetuosity and audacity what one would never obtain by ordinary means. Fortune is a woman. To subdue her, one must either beat her or humiliate her." These are maxims that Mr. Mussolini must have pondered often from the depths of his palace in Venice. And when he announced his new naval program (Embassy Dispatch No. 15 of January 10), he was certainly thinking of the "delaying" tactics of British diplomacy toward him.

Fascism admits of no scruples in foreign policy; it recognizes no guiding principle for action other than its own interest. If, three or four years ago, there were still naive people who remained convinced that treating a treaty as a mere scrap of paper was, in a sense, the monopoly of the homeland of Bismarck and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, the events in Abyssinia—to which Italy was formally bound not only by its obligations as a member state of the League of Nations but also by the 1928 Treaty of Friendship and Arbitration—must surely have opened their eyes. "In our time," the Florentine secretary had already stated, "we have seen great things accomplished by princes who paid no heed to fidelity. We have seen them prevail over those who took loyalty as the basis of their conduct..." And he continued: "One can cite an infinite number of modern examples and point to a great many peace treaties and agreements of all kinds that have become vain and useless due to the disloyalty of the princes who concluded them. It can be shown that those who have acted most like foxes are the ones who have prospered the most"... "A wise prince must not fulfill his promise when doing so would be detrimental to him and when the reasons that led him to make the promise no longer exist. Such is the precept to be taught. On the other hand, one is not bound to honor commitments extracted by force. Indeed, when they concern public affairs, promises made under duress will always be broken without shame falling upon the one who breaks them, as soon as the force that sustained them ceases to exist.

The histories of antiquity are full of such examples, and in our own time, not a day goes by without new ones arising."

It seems evident that, at present, international morality scarcely exists. Therefore, is not seeking to base one's actions on the faithfulness of commitments tantamount to building on sand? This is most likely the opinion of Mr. Mussolini, who believes that his role must consist solely of working by all means toward the greatness of his homeland. For him, Machiavellianism is obviously not an end in itself; it is a method and a school of virility. Nor is the Duce unaware of Frederick the Great's maxims: "When our interests change," said the philosopher-king, "we must change with them. Is it better for the people to perish or for the sovereign to break his treaty? What fool would hesitate to resolve this question?" For the victor of Rossbach, "public law was nothing but a vain phantom that sovereigns paraded in their legal briefs and manifestos even as they violated it," and he believed that "disputes were not settled with paper but with vigorous action." Mr. Mussolini would gladly adopt these statements by the famous Hohenzollern as his own. He would gladly embrace the declarations of Voltaire's friend: "I'm not satisfied with words; I want action, without which I won't stir any more than a Beijing pagoda in its niche," and "I don't give a damn about titles, as long as I have the country". Politics, Frederick II also asserted, "consists more in taking advantage of favorable events than in preparing them in advance."

The Rome-Berlin Axis.

The Italian dictator was well aware, at the moment he decided to ally himself with Germany, that the Third Reich had wholeheartedly adopted—and took pride in—the methods of the "Sergeant King" and his son, and that it claimed to follow both their political doctrines and their methods of government. The Duce therefore knew that in Berlin he would find men as cynically unscrupulous as himself, who, like him, intended to subordinate everything to what they considered the vital interests of the German nation. Under these circumstances, how could Mr. Mussolini approach the issue of Italian-German collaboration?

In his article, M. von Freytagh-Loringhoven argues against the French view that an alliance exists only if it is defined in a treaty. The German jurist points out, however, that a written agreement is merely the formal expression of actual relations. The role of a treaty is to constitute "a set of practical rules," which consequently presupposes a commonality of intentions and viewpoints that, to the very extent that it exists, need not be set forth in a text.

There is no doubt that the considerations thus developed by the author of *The Twilight of Treaties* meet with the full approval of fascist leaders. Our somewhat notarial conception of alliances has been replaced in totalitarian countries by a notion of active collaboration, extremely different from the practice of the past from which we still draw inspiration. An agreement modeled on the prewar Franco-Russian treaty or on our current mutual assistance pacts with reference to the League of Nations is completely at odds with Mussolini's thinking, as well as, it seems, with Chancellor Hitler's guiding principles. The Duce would undoubtedly find it difficult to bring himself to sign a precise and technical document that anticipates every possible scenario and constitutes a secret and binding commitment to be carried out when the time comes—a commitment that could remain a dead letter until the anticipated event actually occurs. "A prudent ruler," Machiavelli asserts, "cannot and must not keep his word when such observance works against him and the reasons that led him to make the promise have disappeared… And a prince has never lacked legitimate reasons to justify his failure to keep his word."

Why, then, commit oneself needlessly, when both sides realize that if the circumstances under which a treaty of alliance was signed were to change significantly, the text would ipso facto lose all its value?

On the contrary, it is important to create a de facto state of solidarity such that each of the two states feels sufficiently bound to the other to the point that any threat directed against Germany would automatically affect Italy's vital interests—and vice versa. The ideological identity of the two regimes greatly facilitates matters, moreover. The Italian-German alliance does not need to be based on a formal treaty. It is founded on the friendship between the two dictators, who have decided to pursue certain common goals in collaboration, while remaining mindful, of course, of their respective interests. It is impossible and pointless to foresee all the situations in which the agreement will need to apply, but what matters is the firm resolve to support one another diplomatically and militarily should the need arise. "If this determination truly exists," writes Mr. von Freytagh-Loringhoven, "the agreement will be easily reached—even in wartime—regarding the extent and nature of the assistance that the two partners will provide to one another... Such is the German-Italian agreement. No treaty records it; but that is precisely where it derives its character and strength."

In Rome, there are no illusions regarding the feelings that the German people as a whole—as well as certain Reich authorities such as Baron von Neurath, or even the current ambassador to Rome, Mr. von Hassel—harbor toward the Italians, nor regarding the scant confidence placed in their military prowess. On the other hand, while holding German military strength in the highest regard here, the Fascist leaders consider themselves—quite wrongly, incidentally—to be intellectually far superior to the products of the Germanic race, "those people who were still ignorant of writing when Rome had Caesar, Virgil, and Augustus." \ To say the least, no natural inclination draws Italians and Germans toward one another, and until now, the currents of sympathy uniting the two nations have been rather weak.

Therefore, no effort has been spared to ensure better mutual understanding. Every measure has been taken to facilitate Italian-German interaction. Labor agreements have been followed by countless visits to Germany by representatives from all sectors of Italian economic activity—industry and commerce—while German intellectuals have visited Italy. Spectacular demonstrations, receptions, and celebrations follow one after another. As I have pointed out, 30,000 agricultural workers will temporarily leave the Kingdom to come and help their comrades in the Reich. It is also known that nearly 20,000 German settlers are to settle in East Africa. It would not even be impossible—although this rumor has been officially denied—that, on the occasion of Chancellor Hitler's visit to Rome next May and his possible stay in Tripoli, Fascist Italy might announce to the world that it is ceding, in full sovereignty, to Germany the Djubaland that England granted it in 1924. This, of course, would be intended to put France and England, if necessary, in a difficult position with regard to the Reich's colonial claims and would serve to steer the Reich toward Africa, as there are fears in Rome that the Berlin government may lose interest in this issue and focus all its attention on Central Europe. If necessary, as the embassy indicated in its dispatch No. 23 of January 20, 1938, we will resolve to address the question of Austria with the Reich as well, demanding, of course, compensation. The development of the policy of autarky that the two governments are seeking to implement together can only contribute to strengthening peaceful cooperation between Germany and Italy, whose entire economies are, as is well known, organized with a view to war. The Reich will likely expect to be compensated, in one form or another, for the sacrifices it makes for its ally. Here, to cite just a few particularly significant examples, is a de facto solidarity that is remarkably effective across all fields and will bear fruit. We will undoubtedly see it develop intensively in the coming months, and the two countries will certainly not be content merely to harmonize their labor systems or their concepts of trade union-corporate relations!

There are, of course, obvious points of divergence between Italy and Germany—which, incidentally, would be far more acute if the shared political system did not create extremely powerful bonds between the two governments. The art lies in keeping these differences artificially in the shadows, even if it

means, when the time comes—and however painful they may be—making the sacrifices necessary to maintain the alliance—by identifying areas of cooperation and putting them into practice immediately. The Polish-German agreement of 1934—the starting point for the entire political evolution of Pilsudski's Poland, and thanks to which the famous "Corridor" issue was put on hold for years—shows what results can be achieved along these lines. Whether it be the fight against communism, the Spanish affair, the undermining of the work and role of the League of Nations, the division of spheres of influence in Central Europe, etc... there will always be—even despite latent rivalries—matters on which, provided the will exists, Italy and Germany can act in accordance with a more or less identical line.

All of this does not, of course, preclude technical discussions that could result in a number of specific and limited agreements, or minutes defining how the two countries might assist one another should certain contingencies arise. But this implies no definitive or precise commitment, and one may obviously wonder what would quickly remain of the Italian-German entente if the wills of the two dictators were to cease to be as closely aligned as they are at present. It also remains to be seen whether such a conception of the practice of alliances between fascist states, which far exceeds the scope of the prewar "ententes cordiales," will not ultimately leave the absolute rulers of totalitarian nations with infinitely less discretion than liberal statesmen once had when it came to applying the provisions of a secret treaty drawn up in due form.

The Franco-Italian Rapprochement.

When one reflects on the circumstances under which the Franco-Italian rapprochement—which was destined to be short-lived—took place, one cannot help but be struck by Mr. Mussolini's approach. Since the Italian negotiators had not obtained from us, with regard to Ethiopia, the withdrawal clause they desired, the head of government ordered his experts to conclude the agreement nonetheless, settling for the following statement: "The French government will seek to satisfy no interests in Ethiopia other than economic interests…"—a statement that could not have suited him, given his ulterior motives. We now know beyond any doubt, thanks to the publication of Marshal de Bono's book *On the Preparation and Initial Operations* in Abyssinia, that as early as 1933, Mr. Mussolini was considering waging war against the Negus and was determined to resolve this issue before the end of 1936. Thus, the Italian dictator accepted a wording that, in and of itself, offered him no guarantee whatsoever vis-à-vis us should he intend to seize Ethiopia by force. It was therefore highly imprudent, given the formidable unknowns at the time and the uncertainty Italy must have felt regarding our stance in the event of a conflict, to attack as it did.

But Mr. Mussolini was convinced that France, in the very aftermath of the Rome Agreements, would not be morally in a position to seriously oppose Italy's expansionist efforts. The Duce speculated that we would be very reluctant to jeopardize the entire process of Franco-Italian rapprochement and that, by force of circumstances, we would be compelled to attempt to play the role of mediator between Great Britain and him, which would facilitate his actions.

As early as December 30, 1934, Mr. Mussolini had personally drawn up "the guidelines and plan of action for resolving the Italian-Abyssinian question." In this document, he noted the need to act quickly, for "time is working against us." When Marshal de Bono requested three divisions for October 1935, the head of government replied on March 8 that he would send him ten. And he added: "Also in view of possible international disputes (League of Nations, etc.), it is advisable to hasten events."

On May 18, the Duce expressed his views even more clearly: "There has even been talk of a

‘demarche’… I have made it clear that under no circumstances will we back down… Thanks to the appointment of two arbitrators from the Italian side, we will be able to get by at the next League of Nations council, but in September we will have to start over. It may then be necessary for us to break with Geneva. It is precisely because of this possibility that it is absolutely essential not to change the October date we have set for the start of any operations. “It is essential that by that time, you have all ten metropolitan divisions fully deployed on the ground.” And he added: “You must stock up on supplies and ammunition for at least three years, even though this may seem absurd given that formal agreements exist regarding passage through the Suez Canal in times of peace and war; however, we must anticipate difficulties in transit. In the House of Commons, there has even been talk of closing the canal. We must always prepare for the most pessimistic and difficult contingencies.”

When Mr. Eden told the head of government, during his visit to Rome in June, that his country could not accept Italy’s excessive demands, Mr. Mussolini, without attempting to justify himself, simply replied: “I have factored a certain degree of tension with England into my calculations.” And he immediately wrote to the Quadrumvir then in Asmara: “You can imagine my response” to the British proposals, continuing: “The British attitude has served us rather than harmed us... The attack must be overwhelming from the very first moment... You therefore have only 120 days to prepare.” The agreement with France, although nothing in its written provisions allowed the Duce to reason in this way, seemed to him to have compromised us sufficiently so that the will of the London cabinet could be thwarted and even paralyzed to a certain extent.

At the outbreak of hostilities, the head of government repeated once more: “The key is to act quickly and strike hard,” and on September 29, he telegraphed Marshal de Bono: “No declaration of war. In light of the general mobilization that the Negus has already officially announced in Geneva, we must put an end to all hesitation. I order you to begin the advance at dawn on the 3rd—I say the 3rd.” Thus, by the will of the Italian head of government, events unfolded rapidly during the period—albeit a relatively short one—from January 1935 to October of the same year.

Here we have a typical example of Mr. Mussolini’s methods. Is there not reason to fear that, with Germany, he might seek—if the opportunity arises—to do something that would be a far more serious version of what he accomplished by capitalizing on the psychological consequences of the agreements of January 7, 1935? There is always cause for concern that, if circumstances seem favorable to him, the Duce might strive to drag the Reich along in his wake—willingly or unwillingly—taking advantage of any temporary shift or imbalance of power in Europe, without having first precisely defined the terms of this collaboration. And perhaps he would not hesitate then to apply to the very destiny of Italy this formula he borrowed from Nietzsche and adopted as the watchword of fascism: “Live dangerously,” which, as he declared on August 2, 1924, at the Palace of Venice, means “being ready for anything—any sacrifice, any danger, any action—when it comes to defending the fatherland and fascism.”

9-

The Beginnings of the Italian-British “Secret Channel”: The Conservatives and Italy (July 1937)

No. 2911. * *, July 12, 1937–xv

Dear Galeazzo,

Mr. Adriano Dingli, legal advisor to this Embassy, will be in Rome from this coming Wednesday through Saturday (July 14–17).

Dingli is a Maltese patriot who has always fought for the cause of Malta's Italian identity, standing by our side with great loyalty. He enjoys a solid reputation among London barristers; you may recall his name in connection with the recent case between the Bank of Egypt and the so-called Bank of Ethiopia, a case he handled that resulted in a brilliant, complete victory for us.

For many years, Dingli has been a member of the Carlton Club, which—as you know—is, so to speak, the official club of the Conservative Party, and which counts among its members all the high- and low-ranking figures of the current government. And at the Carlton Club, Dingli has built up a useful circle of political friends, among whom he enjoys sympathy and respect, as well as a special prestige stemming from his well-known connections with the Italian Embassy.

I have made this introduction to set the stage for what I am about to tell you.

A few days ago, Dingli—who, even during the Italo-Abyssinian conflict, had the opportunity to render us useful services in gathering intelligence and information—was approached by Sir Joseph Ball, Head of the National Government's Propaganda Organization, Administrative Chief and Chief Policy Adviser of the Conservative Party, and a close friend of Chamberlain.

Ball gave Dingli a lengthy speech about Chamberlain's sincere desire to achieve a complete and definitive clarification of Anglo-Italian relations, and essentially asked Dingli if he would be willing to undertake a mission to Rome to "ascertain, through unofficial channels, what might be the best ground on which to work toward the restoration of cordial relations between the two countries, before taking any official steps." Chamberlain—Ball clarified—is absolutely determined to seek a path toward reconciliation with Italy "on a permanent basis," but first wishes to test the waters outside the official channels of the Foreign Office. Ball added that the Italian Ambassador in London would naturally have to be informed of the matter in advance and asked confidentially for his assistance.

In a subsequent conversation, Ball reportedly confirmed to Dingli in fairly precise terms that Chamberlain was aware of the initiative. While insisting on the strictly unofficial nature of the mission, Ball nevertheless specified that Dingli should try to "meet with Foreign Minister Count Ciano." In this regard, Ball gave Dingli a list of topics he might need to discuss with Count Ciano, which I briefly summarize as follows: the possibility of extending the "détente" in radio broadcasts on both sides to the entire scope of Italian-British relations (Ball made a point of emphasizing to Dingli the excellent impression that the Duce's assurance regarding the broadcasts from the Bari station had made in conservative circles); a similar "détente" with regard to the press; the possibility of negotiating a regional non-aggression pact (Chamberlain—Ball stated—is particularly in favor of concluding regional pacts) in the Mediterranean between England, Italy, and France; preparing the ground for the official recognition of the Italian conquest of Abyssinia; the situation in Spain. Ball concluded by emphasizing that it is Chamberlain who currently guides British foreign policy, and by urging Dingli to treat his potential mission with a sense of urgency.

You know that I am generally opposed to so-called private missions, which are almost always the product of some individual's imagination, vanity, or presumption. Even regarding this so-called mission by Dingli, I am not entirely sure that it represents anything truly serious. Indeed, based on the initial checks I have made through other people close to Chamberlain, I do not believe that Ball's initiative, at this stage, has the actual importance that the excellent Dingli attributes to it. This is regardless of the fact that the "points" outlined by Ball—especially the one concerning the Mediterranean Regional Pact—are old, stale ideas that the Duce—as Chamberlain knows very well—

rejected long ago, and about which neither Chamberlain nor others can harbor any illusions, far less today than in the past.

If I ask you to receive Dingli—who is undoubtedly a serious, if modest, individual and a sincere friend of ours—it is only because I believe it would be useful, at this moment, for him to return to London to report to Ball, and through him to the Conservative Party Executive Committee, that you have received him and that, in your capacity as Foreign Minister, you have encouraged him to continue his efforts to clarify Italian-British relations, confirming once again—albeit in general terms—the Duce's and your own desire for a definitive and permanent reconciliation with England.

This is what I need—not from Chamberlain personally, who knows very well what we want and with whom I have established direct and indirect contacts through individuals of far greater stature and influence than Ball and Dingli—but from the Conservative Party Executive Committee. To make Chamberlain's task easier, we must first convince and "indoctrinate" those close to him. It is already a great deal, given the current situation, that Chamberlain is allowing things to proceed as they are. A few days ago, Lord Stonehaven—who until a few months ago, throughout the Baldwin era, served as deputy leader of the Conservative Party—came to see me to thank me, on Chamberlain's behalf, for what the Duce has done for the Bari radio station (which, Stonehaven said, has "helped the Prime Minister immensely"), and to confirm directly on Chamberlain's behalf his firm intention to settle relations with Italy once and for all, and to ask me to help him—both directly and indirectly—in creating a situation between Rome and London in the face of which "the old and the new" at the Foreign Office "can do nothing" (his words) and will have no choice but to accept the fait accompli.

Dingli and Ball are therefore merely part of a complex and extensive network of informants established around Chamberlain, but they—like the others—can be quite useful. To all these various friends of Chamberlain, I naturally give the impression that they "are the only ones who can, etc., etc., and the only ones in whom I have confidence, etc., etc."

Add to this that there is little or nothing left to be gained from the right-wing Conservatives. We squeezed them for all they were worth during the anti-sanctions campaign. Now they've all become impossible grumblers and consider themselves duped and mocked, following the Rome-Berlin Axis and the affairs in Spain. I've told you at length about them on numerous occasions. It is among the centrist and left-wing Conservatives that I'm working—and that we must work—now. Yesterday, they represented the bloc that supported the Baldwin-Eden ticket. Today, they constitute the bloc upon which Chamberlain's power now rests, and he has no intention whatsoever of splitting power fifty-fifty with Eden, as Baldwin did. We must therefore drive a wedge into the emerging "rift" between Eden and Chamberlain and widen it as much as possible.

That is what I am trying to do.

There is no doubt that since the day Chamberlain became Prime Minister, many new developments have been taking place around and within the Foreign Office. There is a sort of atmosphere of unease surrounding Eden and Vansittart, an unease stemming from Chamberlain's increasingly clear intention to gradually take control of British foreign policy. However, Chamberlain is extremely cautious in that he does not want to give Eden an easy pretext for some sensational outburst based on interference in his responsibilities as Secretary of State.

The policy strongly favoring a rapprochement with Germany is Chamberlain's personal initiative. This policy has, as you can imagine, made Vansittart's position extremely delicate, not to say precarious; his

ship is taking on quite a bit of water. Eden, who is a politician of almost chameleon-like volatility, has immediately toned down his anti-German stance and is trying as best he can to follow the new course set by Chamberlain. However, his anti-German and anti-Italian hostility, along with his complete collusion with the French, clearly show just how awkwardly and reluctantly he is allowing himself to be led by Chamberlain—who is no Baldwin. Add to this that, while many Cabinet members view the rapprochement with Germany as an anti-Italian measure, Chamberlain has a broader and more comprehensive plan. Chamberlain desires a rapprochement with Germany and, at the same time, a rapprochement with Italy. Only if the latter fails should the rapprochement with Germany serve as a sort of counter-guarantee and counter-insurance with regard to Italy. In short, Chamberlain's character is gradually evolving, and I believe it is worth monitoring these developments with the utmost diligence, encouraging them whenever necessary.

I believe the time is approaching when we will be able to play some major cards directly with the Prime Minister, essentially bypassing Eden and even Vansittart's mindset, who, despite being inclined toward an agreement with Italy, is entrenched in the old anti-German mindset and still insists on viewing an Anglo-Italian agreement as a means to further his plan for the military or political encirclement of Germany.

All these points will be revisited and elaborated upon in a forthcoming report that I will send you shortly. The situation is, I repeat, in a state of transformation, and it is not lacking in interesting elements.

For now, I would be grateful if you could send Dingli back to London with the necessary supplies. Then we'll see.

Yours, with warm friendship.

Dino Grandi

To His Excellency Count

Galeazzo Ciano di Cortellazzo

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Rome

I.

Roosevelt and Italy (July 1937)

Italian Embassy

TELESPRESSO No. 4843/13OI

H.E. MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

ROME

Washington, July 30, 1937—Year XV AI.10S.U.

Audience with President Roosevelt.

The conversation lasted about half an hour. At first, the President spoke to me about his personal memories of Italy and told me he was grateful to the Duce and the Italian Government for the courtesies extended to his mother and son during their recent stay in Italy. He told me that he was an admirer of the Duce, whom he considered the true restorer of the country's unity and of Italy's new greatness.

After letting me read the letter he was addressing to the Head of Government, he told me that Mussolini must go down in history not only as the restorer of his homeland's fortunes but also as the architect of a better form of coexistence among peoples. He continues to cherish the idea of meeting with the Duce and is certain that if he could have a broad and in-depth discussion with him on the major problems and those looming on the horizon, much good could be done for the fate of our countries and indeed the rest of the world. He realizes that there are two very serious difficulties: one is the current political situation, which does not seem very conducive to general agreements; the second is what he calls a "physical" reason—that is, the actual distance between our two countries. He does not think it is possible for the time being to travel to Europe, nor does he believe that Mussolini intends to come to America; however, there remain other possibilities for a meeting, which he has already mentioned to me in the past. He had the opportunity to discuss this idea with Van Zeeland during the latter's recent visit to America, and Van Zeeland acknowledged that an initial contact between the two men could be of the utmost importance in clarifying the world situation, especially since Van Zeeland recognizes that Italy currently holds the key to resolving European problems. Regarding such a meeting, however, Van Zeeland has doubts that the talks could be limited to Mussolini and Roosevelt without arousing some suspicion in other countries. To conclude this point, I will say that I had the impression that President Roosevelt views this possibility of a meeting very favorably and attaches great importance to it, but that he does not consider it feasible at the present time.

Speaking to me then about general politics, he expressed the opinion that at the present time it is unthinkable to convene a world economic conference; opinions are too divided and misunderstandings are too deep to expect them to be resolved simply by seating delegates around a table, and he also conveyed this opinion to Van Zeeland.

The President is of the opinion that all our efforts must be directed toward improving the situation, but for now, our activities can only take place at a preparatory level. He told me that, although America has today made the improvement of economic relations among nations one of the cornerstones of its policy, he is convinced that no stable and fruitful results can be achieved in this area unless arms are first limited. In elaborating on this view, he emphasized that any economic agreement would be thrown into disarray the day when—whether by agreement or by exhaustion—we were to transition, through extremely severe crises, from a wartime industrial economy to a peacetime one. It is therefore better to give this matter careful consideration while there is still time, so as not to allow matters to reach a point where such a crisis becomes inevitable in its most acute form.

Even if America does not take the initiative, it is always ready to cooperate in any effort aimed at the aforementioned goal.

Since the President had alluded in his remarks to the trend toward economic autarky, I had the opportunity to explain to him how Italy finds itself in a situation of necessity in this regard, as

demonstrated by experience during the period of sanctions. On the other hand, Italy's autarkic tendency in no way signified a tendency toward Italy's economic isolation from other countries; it merely aims to create a minimum of security and independence to meet the needs of national security. The President told me that he understood this Italian point of view and that he had the impression that the Italian economy was on a sound footing. He fears, however, that in other countries, such as Germany, economic relations are based on a purely artificial foundation that cannot serve as a starting point for a permanent settlement. He cited Van Zeeland again to tell me that, in the latter's opinion, Germany's economic situation is worsening with each passing year. He concluded by telling me that when we are truly able to emerge from the current chaotic state and move toward a general stabilization, we will need to take into account all the problems, including that of ensuring the supply of raw materials to countries that lack them—a problem to which he attaches the utmost importance.

When I mentioned to him during the conversation that the population in Italy appears calm and satisfied with the way things are going, he pointed out to me that the same was true in America and that I should not assume otherwise based on the complaints and apparent discontent of certain political groups and parts of the press. If one were to judge by the press coverage prior to the election, one would have concluded that Landon—not he—would be the winner of the campaign. He is convinced that he always has the support of the vast majority of the country, which approves of and backs his policies. I replied that, indeed, based on my own experience, I had come to believe that one should not attach too much weight to the press's speculations.

As I took my leave, the President said that he firmly hoped that our two countries could stand side by side to collaborate on the task of global reconstruction.

The President conducted the conversation in a spirit of great cordiality, and in his repeated references to the Duce and his policies, he always spoke in a tone of the utmost sympathy.

From the conversation as a whole, I got the impression that the President is in a period of waiting and uncertainty, torn between the desire to do something to improve the overall situation and hesitation to take any initiative that might end in failure. This state of mind may also be influenced by the situation in the Far East, which is a source of grave concern for the President and the U.S. government, pushing all other issues into the background for the time being.

The President also told me that he was pleased that I had the opportunity to go to Italy to speak directly with the Head of Government, and he asked me to report back to him as soon as I returned to the United States.

Signed, Suvich

The "Declaration on Race" approved by the Grand Council (October 6, 1938)

The Grand Council of Fascism, following the conquest of the Empire, declares the urgency of racial issues and the need for racial consciousness. It recalls that Fascism has been carrying out, for sixteen years, positive activities aimed at the quantitative and qualitative improvement of the Italian race—an improvement that could be seriously compromised, with incalculable political consequences, by interbreeding and bastardization.

The Jewish problem is merely the metropolitan aspect of a problem of a general nature.

The Grand Council of Fascism decrees:

a) the prohibition of marriages between Italian men and women and members of the Hamitic, Semitic, and other non-Aryan races;

b) , a ban on state employees and employees of public entities—both civilian and military personnel—from marrying foreign women of any race;

c) marriages between Italian men and women and foreigners—even those of Aryan races—must have the prior consent of the Ministry of the Interior;

d) measures against those who undermine the prestige of the race within the territories of the Empire must be strengthened.

Jews and Judaism.

The Grand Council of Fascism recalls that world Jewry—especially after the abolition of Freemasonry—has been the driving force behind anti-Fascism in all fields, and that foreign Jewry or exiled Italian Jews has been—during certain critical periods such as 1924–25 and during the Ethiopian War—unanimously hostile to Fascism.

The immigration of foreign elements—which intensified sharply from 1933 onward—has worsened the attitude of Italian Jews toward the Regime, which they do not sincerely accept, as it is antithetical to the psychology, politics, and internationalism of Israel.

All anti-fascist forces are led by Jewish figures; world Jewry, in Spain, sides with the Bolsheviks of Barcelona.

The ban on entry and the expulsion of foreign Jews.

The Grand Council of Fascism considers that the law concerning the ban on entry into the Kingdom of foreign Jews could no longer be delayed, and that the expulsion of undesirables—according to the term popularized and applied by the great democracies—is indispensable.

The Grand Council of Fascism has decided that, in addition to individual controversial cases that will be submitted for review by the special commission of the Ministry of the Interior, expulsion shall not be applied to foreign Jews who:

a) are over 65 years of age;

b) have entered into a mixed marriage with an Italian citizen prior to October 1, XVI.

Jews with Italian citizenship.

The Grand Council of Fascism establishes the following regarding membership or non-membership in the Jewish race:

#) A person is of the Jewish race if both parents are Jewish;

b) a person born to a Jewish father and a mother of foreign nationality is considered to be of the Jewish race;

c) a person is considered to be of the Jewish race if, despite being born of a mixed marriage, they profess the Jewish religion;

d) a person born of a mixed marriage is not considered to be of the Jewish race if, as of October 1, XVI, they profess a religion other than Judaism.

Discrimination Among Jews with Italian Citizenship.

No discrimination shall be applied—with the exception, in all cases, of education in schools of all levels—against Jews of Italian citizenship—provided they have not been found wanting for other reasons—who belong to:

1) families of those killed in action in the four wars fought by Italy in this century: the Libyan, World, Ethiopian, and Spanish wars;

2) families of war volunteers in the Libyan, World, Ethiopian, and Spanish wars;

3) families of combatants in the Libyan, World, Ethiopian, and Spanish wars who were awarded the War Merit Cross;

4) families of those who fell for the Fascist Cause;

5) families of those maimed, disabled, or wounded in the Fascist Cause;

6) families of Fascists who were members of the Party in the years 1920, 1921, 1922, and the second half of 1924, and families of Fiume legionnaires;

7) families with exceptional merits, to be determined by a special commission.

Other Jews.

Italian citizens of Jewish descent who do not belong to the aforementioned categories, pending a new law concerning the acquisition of Italian citizenship, may not:

a) be members of the National Fascist Party;

b) be owners or managers of businesses of any kind that employ one hundred or more people;

c) own more than fifty hectares of land;

d) perform military service in times of peace and war.

The practice of the professions will be subject to further measures.

The Grand Council of Fascism further decided:

1) that Jews removed from public office shall be granted their normal pension rights;

2) that any form of pressure on Jews to force them to renounce their faith be strictly suppressed;

3) that no changes be made regarding the free practice of religion and the activities of Jewish communities in accordance with existing laws;

4) that, in addition to elementary schools, the establishment of middle schools for Jews be permitted.

Immigration of Jews to Ethiopia.

The Grand Council of Fascism does not rule out the possibility of granting, in part to divert Jewish immigration from Palestine, controlled immigration of European Jews to certain areas of Ethiopia.

This possibility, as well as the other conditions imposed on Jews, may be revoked or tightened depending on the attitude that the Jewish community adopts toward Fascist Italy.

Chairs in Racism.

The Grand Council of Fascism notes with satisfaction that the Minister of National Education has established chairs of racial studies at the Kingdom's leading universities.

To the Black Shirts.

The Grand Council of Fascism, while noting that the complex of racial issues has aroused exceptional interest among the Italian people, announces to the Fascists that the Party's directives on the matter are to be considered fundamental and binding for all, and that the laws to be promptly drafted by the individual ministers must be inspired by the directives of the Grand Council.

The "Pact of Steel" (March 22, 1939)

Pact of Friendship and Alliance between Italy and Germany:

His Majesty the King of Italy and Albania, Emperor of Ethiopia, and the Chancellor of the German Reich consider that the time has come to confirm, through a solemn pact, the close bonds of friendship and solidarity that exist between Fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany.

Considering that, with their common borders now permanently established, a secure foundation for mutual aid and support has been created between Italy and Germany, the two governments reaffirm the policy whose fundamental principles and objectives they had previously agreed upon and which has proven highly beneficial both for the advancement of the two countries' interests and for the security of peace in Europe.

The Italian and German peoples, closely bound together by the profound affinity of their outlooks on life and the complete solidarity of their interests, are determined to continue moving forward side by side and with their combined strength to ensure the security of their living space and the preservation of peace.

On this path marked out by history, Italy and Germany intend, in the midst of a troubled and disintegrating world, to fulfill their task of securing the foundations of European civilization.

In order to enshrine these principles in a treaty, they have appointed as their plenipotentiaries:

His Majesty the King of Italy and Albania, Emperor of Ethiopia: the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Count Galeazzo Ciano di Cortellazzo.

The Chancellor of the German Reich: the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Joachim von Ribbentrop.

Having exchanged their full powers, found to be in good and due form, they have agreed upon the following articles:

Art. 1. The Contracting Parties shall maintain permanent contact for the purpose of reaching agreement on all matters relating to their common interests or to the general situation in Europe.

Art. 2. In the event that the interests of the Contracting Parties are threatened by international events of any kind, they shall immediately initiate consultations on the measures to be taken to protect those interests.

Should the security or other vital interests of one of the Contracting Parties be threatened from outside, the other Contracting Party shall provide the threatened Party with its full political and diplomatic support in order to eliminate this threat.

Art. 3. If, despite the wishes and hopes of the Contracting Parties, one of them should be drawn into hostilities with another or with other Powers, the other Contracting Party shall immediately stand as an ally at its side and support it with all its military forces on land, at sea, and in the air.

Art. 4. In order to ensure, in the event described above, the rapid fulfillment of the alliance obligations assumed under Art. 3, the Governments of the two Contracting Parties shall further deepen their cooperation in the military sphere and in the sphere of the war economy.

Similarly, the two Governments shall maintain constant contact regarding the adoption of other measures necessary for the practical implementation of the provisions of this Pact.

For the purposes set forth in paragraphs 1 and 2 above, the two Governments shall establish Permanent Commissions, which shall be placed under the direction of the two Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

Art. 5. The Contracting Parties hereby undertake, in the event of a war waged jointly, not to conclude an armistice or peace treaty except by full agreement between themselves.

Art. 6. The two Contracting Parties, aware of the importance of their common relations with their friendly Powers, are determined to maintain and develop these relations by mutual agreement, even in the future, in harmony with the shared interests that bind them to these Powers.

Art. 7. This Treaty shall enter into force immediately upon signature. The two Contracting Parties agree to set the initial term of its validity at ten years. They shall enter into agreements in due course, prior to the expiration of this term, regarding the extension of the Treaty’s validity.

In witness whereof, the Plenipotentiaries have signed this instrument and affixed their seals thereto.

Done in two original copies, in the Italian and German languages, both texts being equally authentic.

13-

Notes and report letter by G. Bottai to Ciano and Mussolini (July 1940)

a) Note for Ciano. July 13, 1940

I believe you will appreciate my presenting to you some considerations I have been formulating recently regarding the issues that military victory will raise concerning the organization of peace and the drafting of its international instruments. These are ideas that you have certainly already considered, or that you may at least in part deem superfluous; nevertheless, I trust you will appreciate the spirit in which I set them forth.

The Treaty of Versailles, beyond its military, territorial, and economic provisions, also had an ideological dimension. Just as the war was intended to be democratic—that is, a struggle of democracy against adversarial forces not yet clearly identified—so too was peace intended to be democratic, marking the beginning of a new era of splendor for the principles of democracy, which had by then reached their highest expression through international Masonic radicalism. In fact, the primary architect of Versailles—more so than the League of Nations or the individual states involved or bound by the treaty—was to be Freemasonry, a true international superpower capable of exerting a powerful influence both on relations among states and on the structure and life of the states themselves.

The Weimar Constitution and that of Czechoslovakia were the civil instruments and legal paradigms of the democratic victory born at Versailles. Politicians and jurists were distracted from the fundamental injustices of Versailles—which served Anglo-French hegemony—by the mirage of the aforementioned highly democratic constitutions and by a highly skillful propaganda campaign that focused their attention on the formal problems of the new international order rather than on the substantive ones. Mussolini was the first to denounce Versailles as a danger rather than a guarantee of peace and justice in the world.

It follows from this premise that the peace treaty that will bring an end to the present war must also have its own ideological content, for one era is indeed coming to an end and another is dawning. The era that found its texts and pillars in the English Magna Carta, the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the Weimar Constitution, and the Prague Constitution is coming to an end; the century that we can broadly describe as fascist is dawning.

1) It is therefore necessary that this Declaration of new principles be included in a preamble or section of the Treaty, serving as the political charter of the new order. Such a declaration is all the more necessary when one considers not only the highly authoritative regimes yet to be established, but also the extremely insidious one that remains in the name of Russia. This is a detail that will gradually reveal its true proportions. The Russian Constitution, which was once hailed as the most democratic in the world, could serve as a mirage for the bourgeoisie and for anti-fascist or pro-fascist intellectuals, just as Russian Bolshevism is a mirage for the masses of the dispossessed throughout the world.

2) Just as the Treaty of Versailles devoted Part XIII to social and labor issues, so too should the Axis Treaty set forth the Fascist principles of organization and the highest form of social justice.

Italy already has its own texts governing internal and external relations: the Charter of Labor and the proposals I have repeatedly presented in Geneva for an international corporatist council. I am of the opinion that the ILO, as an institution, should not be disbanded, but rather transformed into a major center for social studies and information, headquartered in Rome or another Italian city, and including the "Joy and Work" office currently located in Berlin. Mussolini's Italy was the first to develop new principles of social coexistence and to defend them against the old Geneva-based organization; it is only fitting that it should host the new institute.

Regarding the activities and remit of the proposed Center, one must bear in mind the close relationship between social and economic matters and the experience already gained by the ILO in its dealings with the Economic Section of the League of Nations.

It may be that the Axis Powers do not fully agree on the wording of the International Labor Charter, given the profound differences between the two systems of producer organization existing in the two countries. Reaching an agreement, however, is not difficult, provided that the principle of legally recognized trade unions—which is truly the defining principle of the Revolution of 1789—and the corporatist principle as a system for forming the representative and governing bodies of internal life are explicitly enshrined.

Naturally, Italy would need to reform many of its current institutions to offer an encouraging example of a new form of state and social organization. Ministries, guilds, confederations, parastatal bodies, quasi-union organizations, and public entities in general should undergo, along with the bureaucratic system, a profound and comprehensive overhaul with the aim of simplifying, streamlining, and strengthening all public functions, especially those pertaining to the nation's economic life.

3) The new peace treaty will certainly contain financial and economic provisions. Only a fair distribution of essential raw materials can seriously safeguard against hegemony. A quantitatively balanced exchange of goods or services constitutes a false and illusory equilibrium, because those who possess the most valuable raw materials are always in a stronger position.

This also applies to the rumors published regarding the task entrusted to Dr.

Schacht. The economic organization of Europe, understood as a unified whole, must undoubtedly be based on the principle of the complementarity of economies; but there are different ways of applying this principle. There is a static approach—that is, one derived from a country's economic configuration at a given moment—and there is a dynamic approach—that is, one derived from a consideration of a country's economic capacities and needs, assessed in relation to the country's political and moral weight.

The first approach leads to the supremacy of industrial nations over agricultural ones, while the second fosters a system of collaboration that—driven by the principle of national self-sufficiency, tempered by a well-understood consideration of comparative costs—promotes the economic progress of each and every nation.

Naturally, in this field as well, Italy should undertake a bold reassessment of its positions to strive for improved quality and lower prices for many of its self-sufficient products, if it wishes to increase its foreign trade and normalize its domestic trade, which now exhibits all the characteristics of monopolistic regimes.

4) It is not advisable to limit participation in the study of all these problems exclusively to state administrative bodies, excluding those who, through their scientific and professional activities, have acquired special expertise and recognized standing. Since the vast majority of these individuals belong to the ranks of university professors, it is evident that the Ministry of National Education could make a significant contribution to the Duce and the bodies designated by him. It is desirable that those who, by order of the Duce, undertake to study these issues do so in collaboration with the university; its representatives on any commissions should be designated and selected in consultation with me and my offices.

b) Note for Mussolini. July 19, 1940

Italy, in collaboration with its ally, will soon have to guide the destiny of a "fascist or fascistized" Europe. To this end, certain political, legal, social, and economic models already established by Fascism may need to be emphasized; while others, in light of new requirements, will need to be created.

The revolutionary front of thought—whose ranks include the most authentic fighters, fueled by faith and study—yearns to place itself at Your command to secure Victory, consolidate the Revolution, and reaffirm the noblest Fascist traditions, including in the economic reconstruction of Europe.

Already, our comrades of the Axis have begun examining certain sectors. At a conference of professors held in Weimar in early July, topics related to "Economic Science in the War of Revolution" were discussed. After affirming that the defunct system must be replaced with a new, vital structure, the conference proposed, among other things, a conception of international trade based—as in Italy and Germany—not on the dominance of the lowest price and competition, but on the principle of a fair price. On political matters, Rosenberg examined the criteria that should guide life in Northern Europe. Other scholars addressed the formal and structural transformations to which international institutions and associations—hitherto modeled on the League of Nations—must adapt. Still others discussed the concept of value, represented no longer by gold and capital but by production and labor; in harmony with these premises, the characteristics of token money were also outlined.

Our willing collaboration in this work of rigorous scholarship could prove extremely useful once the subject matter has been identified and examined within the country. Scholars of ethnic, geographic, cultural, and historical issues could contribute important elements to the reconstruction. In the economic and legal fields, the balance of trade, prices, customs barriers, social justice, currency, finance, banking, hoarding, autarky, the colonial system, and—in particular—the corporatist system, when examined from the perspective of the Axis Victory, can give rise to new theoretical considerations that are not without practical utility.

Professors at Italian universities would consider it their greatest privilege to undertake, under your guidance, a general survey of Fascist doctrine, to group it into sectors, and to outline, from a strictly theoretical standpoint, possible directions. The topics would be submitted in advance for your review, and the work should not, I believe, take the outward form of a conference. It would be carried out in rapid stages, in composed silence, within the closed academic sphere, and the conclusions would then be presented to you; these could remain confidential until you deem it appropriate, or they could be examined or discussed by other sectors of the Regime.

The younger generation of professors at our universities, educated in the fascist tradition within a

fascist climate, also sees itself as a militia at your command and, as such, asks to serve you. If the experiment, as I believe, proves fruitful, you may subsequently consider the possibility of bringing the best elements into contact with their German teaching comrades in order to unify, through fruitful and loyal collaboration, certain theoretical principles that will have emerged from the study and that you will have deemed consistent with the spirit of Fascist doctrine.

c) Report-letter to Mussolini.

July 20, 1940 DUCE, I consider it my duty to submit a report to You, based on my observations and deductions regarding the current political situation and the specific role of Italian culture in preparing for peace, drawn from my official contacts with the Italian academic world. Perhaps these will be of no interest to the development of Your thinking; but I hope You will consider them for what little they are worth.

Before delving into the subject, it is necessary to make a few preliminary observations regarding the political tendencies of our cultural sphere and its attitude toward Fascism. For while it is true that, over twenty years of Fascism, new ideas have increasingly shaped the life of the country, radically transforming it, it is equally true that, as far as culture is concerned, a conflict has gradually deepened, causing intellectuals to become entrenched in a sterile conservatism. One could speak of a Fascist cultural movement in the early years of the revolution, based on certain nationalistic and idealistic elements that took concrete form in the reforms of 1925 and later culminated in the first manifestations of corporatism, both before and after the Charter of Labor. With the decline of nationalism and idealism, the Fascist cultural movement then shifted toward an increasingly corporatist orientation, developing the more strictly revolutionary aspect of the new social conception. This was, perhaps, the most fruitful period of collaboration: that segment of Italian culture that participated in it succeeded in truly positioning itself on a revolutionary plane and in forcing the larger conservative segment to enter the arena of debate and to collaborate indirectly as well. From this perspective, the years from 1932 to 1935 were the most fruitful, and our revolutionary ideology exerted a significant influence abroad at that time, primarily on National Socialism, which, having come to power in 1933,5! looked to Fascism to follow its example.

But with the outbreak of the war in Ethiopia, Italian intellectual circles fell silent, renouncing any further collaboration. On the theoretical level, the increasingly rigorous critique directed against idealism definitively alienated it from the revolutionary process. On the social front, the end of the debate surrounding the principles of corporatism halted the development of a new political and economic science. With the revolutionary minority silenced, the old conservative culture found itself without opponents and strengthened its positions, largely masking itself with an outward, sycophantic deference toward the Regime.

Thus we arrived at last September. Four years of hostile silence from the cultural sphere could not fail to influence the nation’s consciousness. Becoming increasingly anti-revolutionary, the intellectual class retreated to the most traditional positions: liberalism and Catholicism. On the other hand, the political demands of the revolution, not supported by the cultural movement, were forced to rely on the ideologies of National Socialism, which was advancing rapidly. This necessity, in turn, intensified the hostility of the cultural sphere and fueled a reactionary movement that extended even to the working classes. It is therefore no surprise that, once the war broke out, virtually all of Italy found itself pro-British and pro-French, anti-German, and anti-revolutionary.

[Nine lines are illegible in the original due to deterioration].

The blame for this disorientation falls largely on the intellectual world; and the contempt with which culture is viewed by those with revolutionary faith is easily explained. But it is also true that, within the cultural sphere, there are individuals who are ideologically and scientifically prepared for the tasks of the Revolution, and that one could rely on them to renew from within a world that cannot be ignored. Those who work in schools know that every year many young people graduate, waiting in vain to be guided toward working, with scientific rigor, on a project of reconstruction. By viewing the entire world of culture with suspicion and failing to distinguish between the old and the new within it, we run the risk of abandoning young people to the force of tradition and of fostering in them the very same spirit of hostility that animates the older generation.

This introduction seemed necessary to me to clarify what I believe is today's task. Spiritually unprepared and disoriented, we are perhaps on the eve of peace, with the awareness that winning peace is something entirely different from winning war. Now I believe we can certainly affirm that peace will be won by those who are best able to carry out the Revolution—those who can offer the world, in precise and concrete terms, both ideologically and technically, the most comprehensive revolutionary program, one that, by bridging the gap between the old and the new, succeeds in gaining the trust of both the victors and the vanquished. And to do this, we must immediately shake off our disorientation, get to work, and present ourselves alongside Germany—indeed, first and foremost to Germany—with clear and far-reaching ideas.

But, in the meantime, from what I can gather from certain signs—albeit vague and imprecise—and from some commentary on the reconstruction plans circulating in the German press, a tendency is emerging to confine the issue of peace to the narrow, particularistic issue of Italian peace and to play, without clear awareness, on an ambiguous concept of autarky. In short, I fear that the same mistake will be repeated on the peace front that—without your energetic insight—could have been made on the war front: leaving Germany to its own devices and letting the revolutionary initiative slip through our fingers.

Germany has two ways of making peace and securing its victory: one conservative and plutocratic, the other revolutionary and corporatist. In the first case, imperialist Germany will remain facing a more or less vassal Europe, in a new sort of unstable equilibrium and an irreconcilable clash of ideologies and programs. In the second, it will fulfill an international role—European and beyond—by establishing a new order based on shared ideals and interests, in which Germany's well-being will be contingent upon that of other countries.

Which of these two paths will prevail? The danger of the first solution is evident: the victor, enriched by the spoils of the enemy, tends to become conservative and to maintain the superiority achieved over the vanquished. But it is not certain that this approach will prevail; indeed, there are serious reasons to believe the opposite. One reason is the revolutionary, collectivist drive that led Germany to victory, based on a social structure and technology whose organic development cannot be halted. A second reason—and a decisive one—lies in the actions of the rest of Europe, but above all of the victorious ally, Italy. If, in fact, Italy urges Germany to adopt the second solution and works to encourage the rest of Europe toward this closer collaboration, it will help to mitigate and then eliminate Germany's conservative tendencies and bring an end to the policy of balance of power.

Now, unfortunately, the approach that is beginning to prevail in Italy stands in complete opposition to this second solution. Based on an initial distrust of Germany and a fear of its dominance, there is a hope for an Axis victory that would lead to the establishment of two separate spheres of influence, two

autarkic economic units—that is, two autonomous entities—that would allow Italy to play a political role in the future that might be anti-German. But in doing so, one fails to consider that confining the German sphere of influence within a new form of European balance of power means strengthening its racism in its most materialistic sense and its imperialism in the sense of greater arrogance. A Germany thus confined will inevitably seek to subordinate the interests of its neighboring countries to its own, will inevitably seek, sooner or later, to reach the Mediterranean via Trieste, will inevitably strive for ever-greater influence in that sea, and, in other words, will inevitably seek to extend its dominance to the detriment of others' spheres of influence. And this necessity, intrinsic to its imperialism—common to all forms of imperialism, but all the stronger the more it is linked to racist pride—will be exacerbated by Germany's full awareness of our distrust and our program. Mistrust is met with mistrust, and mistrust on the political and economic levels translates into a desire to undermine and boycott. Our actions will be hindered in every way, our industry crippled, and our markets restricted. Given our differing starting positions, competition will be entirely to our detriment, and a relationship of dependence will be unavoidable. In other words, the ideal of autarky will find its own negation within itself, and what we seek to avoid will, ironically, be brought about. From a social standpoint, moreover, mutual autarkies cannot help but give rise to the establishment of two plutocracies—and in particular, an Italian plutocracy serving the stronger one. The revolutionary goal, thwarted on the international stage, will be denied all the more in domestic politics.

Opposed to autarkic policy is the danger of a complementary economy, as would result from a German plan already outlined. Germany would be surrounded by agricultural countries, and its dominance would be exercised not through external confrontation with other countries, but through internal organization within the new Europe. But it is precisely here, on this level, that Italy—and subsequently the rest of Europe—can act by adapting the concept of complementarity for their own benefit and that of the Germans themselves. Once the concept of collaboration is accepted, its form and results depend on the collaborators. And it will depend entirely on us whether we can convince the Germans that, in our mutual interest, the principle of complementarity implies the maximum industrial development of all of Europe, and whether, as a result, we can persuade them to support the strengthening of our industries.

In summary, I believe that the fundamental principles of our political action should be the following:

1. Maximum loyalty to the Germans. Only on the basis of loyalty can a revolutionary program be built and promoted internationally. The
policy of balance implies a contradiction between what is thought and what is said; hence diplomacy; hence the ruling class that holds the secret and stands opposed to the masses; hence corruption, bourgeoisie, and plutocracy.

11. Expanding the victors' sphere of action into an international endeavor that transforms the concepts of race and autarchy, shifting them from the materialistic to the spiritual realm.

ni. Preparation of a corporatist revolutionary plan which, through its ideal principles and technical provisions, responds to today's deepest spiritual needs and can win the trust of both the victors and the vanquished.

But if these are the principles that must guide our action, it is clear that we must get to work immediately and foster, starting now, a cultural movement capable of exerting ideological and political influence. The Germans have been preparing for a long time, and we are absent: we distrust them needlessly and place ourselves, without question, in their hands.

I wanted to tell You all this so that You would not believe that the leading figures of Italian culture are, without exception, on the Aventine Hill. On the contrary, I believe that the best resource on which Italy can rely is that of culture, and that the key to regaining the initiative of the Revolution in its international political arena is ideology. I also believe that, once the movement begins, many young scholars would suddenly come forward and devote themselves with conviction and irreplaceable ability to the work of scientific and political construction. But the indispensable condition for achieving this result is that the scientific movement be allowed to unfold with serenity and continuity, in an atmosphere that, while political, is removed from the overly contingent vicissitudes of the most immediate political action. Preparing an international corporatist plan means delving deeper into the critique of the political and economic equilibrium (liberalism), the positive and negative aspects of autarky (economic organism and protectionism), the problem of the gold standard and its replacement (labor economy and unemployment), the problem of the international economic organism (general or territorial corporation), the principle of the complementary economy (in the German sense and in what might be the Italian sense), the relationship between the European system and the global system (partial or total revolution), the relationship between Fascism and Bolshevism (hierarchy and democracy), the problem of raw materials and population surpluses (distribution of territories or movement of the masses), the relationship between the rural and industrial economies (poor and rich countries), domestic and international institutional reforms (parliamentarism, society, and the hierarchy of nations), the meaning of racism and its political consequences (Germanism, Judaism, Latin peoples, yellow races), etc. One need only mention these issues to immediately grasp their complexity and how they intertwine. The Germans are addressing them methodically and with a consistency of principles and research that has now lasted for several years. In Italy, not only has very little been done, but in general—even among those who hold university chairs—there is no awareness that such problems exist or could be the subject of study. Those who could contribute, and who face the incomprehension and misoneistic hostility of academic science, need to be placed in the spiritual and material conditions to work and discuss on a plane of higher dignity.

Professors at Italian universities would consider it their greatest privilege to undertake, under Your guidance, a comprehensive survey of Fascist doctrine, to group it into sectors, and to outline, from a strictly theoretical standpoint, its possible directions. The topics would be submitted in advance for Your review, and the work should not, I believe, take the outward form of a conference. It would be carried out in rapid stages, in composed silence, within the closed academic sphere, and the conclusions would then be presented to You; these could remain confidential until You deem it appropriate, or they could also be examined and discussed by other sectors of the Regime.

The young generation of professors at our universities, educated in the fascist tradition within the fascist climate, also sees itself as a militia under Your command and, as such, asks to serve You. If the experiment, as I believe, proves fruitful, You may subsequently consider the possibility of bringing the best minds into contact with their German academic comrades to unify, through fruitful and loyal collaboration, certain theoretical principles that have emerged from the study and that You have deemed to be in accordance with the spirit of Fascist doctrine.